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Jeudi
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Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
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111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

Thursday 28 March 2024

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

Jeudi 28 mars 2024

The House met at 0900.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Good morning. Let us pray.

Prières / Prayers.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

2024 ONTARIO BUDGET

Resuming the debate adjourned on March 26, 2024, on the motion that this House approves in general the budgetary policy of the government.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Ms. Catherine Fife: It's always a pleasure to stand in my place and represent the needs of the people of Waterloo, and now, Waterloo region, lately.

It was an interesting budget for this government to bring forward earlier this week, on Tuesday. There was a lot of fanfare, as there always is.

I will say that as the official opposition for the province of Ontario, we were looking for some tangible affordability measures that would meet Ontarians where they are right now. And counter to the commercials that we see constantly in Ontario, funded by the taxpayers of the province of Ontario—the partisan advertising that this government said that they would stop doing, and not follow in the footsteps of the Liberals. They've actually doubled down on these commercials, and I feel like it's a very good metaphor for how insulting this government is to the people of the province that we are elected to serve.

Speaker, you just said a prayer as we started our day here at Queen's Park. We actually take an oath in this House, when we are first elected, to put the needs of the people of this province first, to dedicate ourselves to public service, which is indeed a calling, I would say, because not a lot of rational people look to come into this space and have 16 hours of nonsense on many, many days.

It's safe to say that we are disappointed with the budget that was presented, especially given what we heard at pre-budget consultations.

The pre-budget consultation process is actually a really interesting process. It's a long-standing tradition here in Ontario that the finance committee, of which I'm Vice-Chair, will travel around the province and listen to people, give them time to share their experience, and then we in turn take that information back and we learn from it, we adapt to it, we honour it, I would say, and then, we adapt policies and legislation to address some of those problems.

For many people who came forward—I'm thinking of nurses, I'm thinking of teachers, I'm thinking of people

who are committed to building affordable housing, who are in the not-for-profit sector, who are on the front lines of how people are struggling in Ontario. They came to committee in the north and the south, east, west, and they shared their experiences with us. Sometimes, from the government members, they got rhetoric like "Aren't you happy that we gave you a penny when you asked for a dollar?"

On the whole, the people who came before us actually came to us with solutions. They came to us with solutions because they are at the tipping point on affordability.

I'm going to honour some of those voices today, and I'm going to honour the women of this province, specifically.

Our colleague from Toronto—St. Paul's often asks us to look at the budget through a gender lens, and so we have. We've done some analysis of how this government, since being elected, has treated women. I would say there have been tangible reversals on progress that women were making in Ontario.

I was thinking about this as I was talking to my concierge at the apartment building that I live in here in Toronto. His name is Mohammad, and he's actually a doctor from Pakistan. He is working security in a building here in Toronto. I've been trying to help navigate some concerns that he has on health care and on immigration, ironically. One of the first conversations I had with him, in 2018, was when this government froze the minimum wage.

This government talks a lot about your pockets and getting their hands out of your pockets. When you froze the minimum wage, Mohammad, who has five children—that hurt Mohammad, but it hurt women in this province even more, because we have not made that progress; we are still 78 cents on the dollar to every dollar that a man makes in Ontario, in 2024. Did this government think about how it would negatively impact people like Mohammad, but also racialized and marginalized women across this province? No, they did not. They went right into the pockets of the most vulnerable people in Ontario, and they essentially removed money right out of their pockets. If you are a full-time worker—over a two-year period, that cost Ontarians \$7,000. It's truly shocking.

I raise the minimum wage because even though the government has promised—in October of this upcoming year—to increase the minimum wage, there is no funding in the budget for that.

What we have here is more commercials, essentially. Commercials don't pay the rent. Those "It's Happening Here" in Ontario commercials actually cause people some

stress, especially if they are a parent waiting in an emergency room for close to 12 to 24 hours. One of my constituents was in the emergency room for almost 30 hours with a mental health concern. That is not the right place—

M^{me} France Gélinas: The average is 21 hours.

Ms. Catherine Fife: The average is 21 hours in the emergency room, if you go to the hospital.

Ontarians are not seeing themselves reflected in this budget, and that is a serious problem. It's a serious problem, obviously, for Ontarians who are looking for some leadership, but it's also a problem for all of us, as legislators, because if you care about the people in your riding—in Sudbury and Hamilton, in Nickel Belt—you fully understand those challenges, if you are truly connected to your community.

The health care system in Ontario has never been this painful. It is literally painful for people. People are waiting in pain in emergency rooms—if they have an emergency room that's open. This past year, 203 emergency room closures—this has never happened in Ontario before. This is a record. This government likes to use the word “historic.” Well, I've never heard a government use the word “historic” so many historic times. They overuse “historic.” These are not records that you should be proud of—203 emergency room closures in Ontario.

We've done some analysis, as has the FAO, an independent officer of the Legislature. He has concluded that the direct connection between Bill 124, which was the unconstitutional piece of legislation that this government brought in—it was ruled unconstitutional. It capped workers at 1%—the very workers this government were calling heroes—and for those three years, this pushed health care workers and education workers and public service workers out of the field because they just couldn't afford it. And so what did the government do, even when the court ruled the legislation to be unconstitutional? They appealed the decision, wasting more money.

0910

MPP Jamie West: They appealed it twice.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Yes, they appealed it twice.

Honestly, the negative impact of Bill 124 on this province will be felt for years. And there's no concerted effort even to rebuild that workforce.

I have to say, there are many of us on this side and many of us who are think tanks and academics and politicals who think that this is very intentional—very intentional that you have abandoned your respect for the public service workers.

I'm just going to connect this. When the finance minister got up in his place, he also mentioned the former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. This was a day here in the Legislature—I really want to say, everybody spoke so well, very emotional. I did congratulate MPP Mulroney on her eulogy to her father. In fact, her whole family, really, I have to say, showed such strength and character during this grieving process.

When the finance minister referenced Brian Mulroney, he was indicating that this budget had some sort of quality

and some sort of shiny motion that had dignity, that recognized what public service used to be like.

I actually have in my office a framed thank-you note to my former father-in-law, Walter Fife, and it's signed by Brian Mulroney, for his 41 years of service to the national service. That is how leadership shows respect for the people who work for us. And we are—yes, you guys can clap.

Interjections.

Ms. Catherine Fife: That used to be a pillar, an anchor of public service. People used to want to come into public service, because it is a calling, to help people. It feels good to help people.

I'm happy to be helping Mohammad, the concierge at my building. I have not given up on his getting his medical qualifications. Do you know why? Because he's a talented renal specialist, which Ontario needs.

I want to thank our deputy leader, who has really taken this call up, this charge to ensure that the people who come to this great country and this great province, who have talents—that we honour the talents. It's not just to honour them and their dedication, but also because we need their services. What a missed opportunity.

The Bill 124 piece was still a common theme in pre-budget consultations. This government has had to make amendments—make amends, I would say. The Financial Accountability Officer said that over the next three years, the price tag for your imposing unconstitutional, one would say, illegal legislation on the workers of this province—the final bill will come to \$13.7 billion. So you pushed that can down the road, causing great damage to health care.

When I talk to nurses—and I'm going to be quoting the Ontario Nurses' Association—they describe their experiences right now in hospitals as essentially like a war zone. There's not enough time. There are not enough resources. There's not enough expertise, because we've lost some of those dedicated nurses who were looking to mentor future nurses.

The connection to the health care system, for me, is very personal. I did mention last time that the wedding is coming for my son, in August. His future fiancée—because she did say yes. She also said yes to the dress, I just want to say. It was a good moment. You have to find the joy in this world. She's a nurse who can't get full-time work in Ontario even though she's top of the class—specialized in NICU, working with babies. I'm so concerned that they're going to leave Ontario, as a parent. I want them to settle in Ontario. I want them to be able to afford a home. I want them to have some quality of life. I want them to have a doctor.

Speaker, 2.3 million Ontarians do not have a doctor, and in four years, that number is going to go to 4.4 million Ontarians.

Our entire health care system is designed so that in order to enter the health care system and access appropriate care, you need a doctor. That's how the system is designed. So when people don't have a doctor, where do they go? They go to the urgent cares.

The wait time at urgent cares in Waterloo region, last Saturday, was 10 hours—so 10 hours for an urgent care, or 21 hours at the emergency room. These are the choices that the government is proud of?

This is the problem that the government made a choice not to solve in this budget, and for the life of me, I can't understand it.

Our leader and our entire caucus fully understand that if you want a strong economy, if you want to draw investors into the province of Ontario, if you want people to reach their potential, then you make sure that you have the social infrastructure, you make sure that you have the acute care, but you also have that full spectrum of care, and that includes mental health, and that includes good schools.

Waterloo region is drawing talent from around the world. But now what's at risk for that investment and that drawing of that talent into our region is the fact that people can't find a doctor.

That's why the chambers of commerce from across this province also have been on this campaign to recruit. The government should also be focused on retaining the talent. This is the missing piece—that we cannot afford to lose more doctors and lose more nurses. We certainly can't afford to lose more teachers. So that's the retaining piece. But recruiting into that system—that system has to be greatly improved, because you cannot recruit into a broken system. It actually goes against everything that we value.

This budget bill can be amended. It can be fixed. We want to fix it. We want to make sure that the needs of Ontarians are reflected in this budget. We haven't given up. We want people to have hope.

I just want to say to the members across the way, when we ask questions about the wait times, about the 600,000 women who are waiting for mammograms in Ontario, about the 2.3 million Ontarians who don't have a doctor, and then you come back at us with the carbon tax, that also is incredibly insulting to the people we're elected to serve. It does feel like a Monty Python skit sometimes here in question period. It's astounding to me that these serious problems do not warrant serious attention and a serious response. We need a serious government in 2024, in Ontario, because people are hurting.

I did want to go through some of, as I mentioned, the gender lens for budget 2024.

We heard from Victim Services of Durham Region, and they said the government should deem intimate partner violence as an epidemic. I asked them, "Do you think the government of Ontario should recognize that intimate partner violence is an epidemic?" They said, "Absolutely. The numbers speak for itself. It is recognizing the issue for what it is, absolutely an epidemic, crisis, human rights crisis" in Ontario.

The government is stubbornly stuck and refuses to acknowledge the problem. If you don't acknowledge a problem, if you don't identify a problem, how will you ever solve that problem? And this problem impacts all of us. All of us have personal experiences where we have friends or family who have experienced violence or fear of

violence or harassment. I personally do not know one woman in my life who has not experienced some form of violence or harassment because of her gender.

0920

So they were actually asking for the government to treat this issue seriously, and they specifically required consideration for the creation of an inter-ministerial task force. This was a really good solution because it would incorporate the women's issues and the economic impact, which is a good combination to have because women are often coerced and controlled away from their financial independence. It's well-documented; the research is very clear. And then, it also would include the justice system.

To say that the justice system in Ontario is broken would be being kind to this government. For all the bluster of this government on tough-on-crime—right now, it is bluster, because rapists and people who assault women are going free in Ontario.

I talked about Emily at the fall economic statement—what courage she had to come forward and talk about her experience of being sexually assaulted, and then her experience in the court system and the lack of independent legal advice that she was supposed to have access to.

Legal aid is not even mentioned in the budget.

These are choices that this government has made.

Right now, in the media studio, the member from Toronto Centre has a panel of women and legal advisers. These two women are talking about how hostile the court system is to women when they have the courage to come forward; how they've been denied justice.

But they've got money for helicopters—four helicopters to monitor auto thefts. There are cheaper options to address auto theft, I have to say. This is the great irony for me: Even if those helicopters catch the bad guys as they're trying to steal your car, once those people get into the court system, they will not get access to justice in a reasonable time.

The Auditor General said eight months was the threshold. Emily's rapist went free after 18 months. The court case was dismissed; it was stayed. Justice was denied to Emily, but one could also say her accused never got their day in court, as well. The system and the backlog is preventing justice, and we all know that justice delayed is justice denied.

So I applaud our member from Toronto Centre for bringing these voices right here into the House. This is seriously what we have to do, because the stats on the court system are not so transparent, and that's also very intentional, I would say.

The fact that bail reform was not funded in this budget, even though we hear the tough talk from the Premier; the independent legal advice, which was piloted in Thunder Bay, Toronto and Ottawa during the pandemic—then it was extended to the whole province, but the funding allocation was not? This is a do-more-with-less sort of initiative.

Those women who have come to Queen's Park to share their experience—this is an opportunity to learn. And this is what the pre-budget consultation was also about—an

opportunity for us, as legislators, to learn and to apply solutions.

So I want to applaud Victim Services of Durham Region for making this recommendation.

We also heard from Bethesda House and Laura Burch from Sault Ste. Marie. She was talking about domestic violence in the Soo and Whitby, and she cited the 62 femicides that happened in 52 weeks—62 women were murdered by their partners in 52 weeks. She talked about the fact that they served 123 clients over the course of the year. They received 3,000 calls. They have funding for only one staff member, 18 beds. They had to turn away 1,063 women and children. When you turn away women who are fleeing violence because you're not resourced to take care of that situation, that's a sign for that woman and for the children—often, women who are fleeing violence have children—that the system as a whole does not care. It needs to be prioritized in the budget. It was not prioritized in this budget.

They also made a really good case that prevention is the path for eradicating violence against women. I have to tell you, there is a lot of truth in that statement.

Speaker, 15 years ago, I was a researcher at Camino, and we did a course for high school students around what a healthy relationship looks like. I remember a young man saying to me, "I didn't know that when I called her such-and-such a name"—he said, "I've heard that all my life from my parents, from my home. I didn't know that it was even demeaning."

Education is the key to eradicating violence, and this can be incorporated into the education curriculum. There needs to be political will to incorporate what healthy relationships look like. It should start really early. Now that we're going back to math and science in kindergarten, why not throw some healthy relationships in there too?

YWCA Toronto really made a case, because the YWCA here in Toronto and, actually, across the province—I'm thinking of what is happening in Kitchener right now. They said they must not just provide shelters but must give more supports to those fleeing violence, including wraparound, culturally sensitive, trauma-informed supports. This is really hard work—when you are on the front line and you're working in a shelter and you're dealing with a lot of issues. In fact, we now know from the brain injury society of Ontario how many women have concussions, and that impacts decision-making. There's a research project going on right now—also another good opportunity to learn. I like learning. It's fun.

The YWCA said, "Our ability to provide support is directly tied to our funding." They also said that intimate partner violence must be declared an epidemic. Why the resistance to this from the Ford government? What is the harm? What would you lose from identifying and naming a problem?

Moving on to health care: The Charles H. Best Diabetes Centre—Lorrie Hagen is the executive director—made a compelling case around community care. I'm going to quote some of their submission. They said that their care, as a diabetes organization, keeps people out of the

hospital. Do we want to alleviate the pressure on the acute-care system? Of course we do. They are asking for \$3.5 million to do so, and they made a financial case to do so. They said, "The acute-care system that currently sends type 1 patients to us would be forced to take on this care in a very expensive and inefficient way. The cost of patient care in hospitals is up to \$1,800 a day," versus "our interdisciplinary community-based preventive care that provides exceptional value at \$3.50 a day." This is a good solution. It is a smart solution. It's not going to get any of the private health care corporations that go to your events any additional funding, but it is community-based, not-for-profit, where every single dollar goes into the care of the clients. That is the system—

Interjections.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Yes, you guys can clap.

I also want to talk about wage parity in the community. I want to thank our labour critic for really talking about the discrepancy between workers who work in the caring sector—health care workers, mental health, social workers—versus what's happening in some of our institutions.

The Ontario Community Support Association was asking for \$533 million for the home and community care sector, to keep pace with inflation and to eliminate the wage gap between home and community care. The wage gap in their sector poses a challenge in recruiting and retaining—"Sector struggles to recruit a robust workforce." The pre-pandemic vacancy rates were 7%; they have now risen to 20%. We are losing the talent in community because the nature of the work is so emotionally laborious. It is hard, hard work, with fewer people and an increased workload, and then the wage has not kept pace.

0930

Keeping on health care, I just want to say that the Ontario Nurses' Association—Erin Ariss presented. ONA has been so strong on the health care file, not just because they're defending their members; they're actually defending public health care.

Interjections.

Ms. Catherine Fife: For sure.

This is what they said today—and they quoted the Financial Accountability Officer, as well.

I just want to say, every time the FAO comes out with a report that is critical of the government or has looked at the expenditure, has revealed the Expenditure Monitor—the Expenditure Monitor actually keeps, in real time, what the government has spent or is planning to invest. We fought for the Financial Accountability Officer back in 2013. It was worth the fight, I would say, because now we have an independent, non-partisan research office that can track where the money is going, or where the money is not going.

So they quoted the FAO, and the FAO is still predicting a shortage of 30,000 nurses by 2028.

They also cited the 203 emergency room closures in Ontario.

Where are these emergency room closures happening? Primarily in rural, northern, smaller communities.

I'm thinking particularly of Minden, who lost their emergency room suddenly. It happened so quickly—right, France?—in two or three months. All of a sudden, there was a financial crisis that was completely predictable, based on Bill 124 and underfunded funding models for hospitals and acute care, and the government just decided to close it. They did leave a little phone in the ER. I don't know if you saw that. There was a phone on the wall; if you needed help, you could call somebody. That phone is even gone right now. And Minden, who are still fighting for their hospital, they're still fighting for their emergency room, they're still tracking all the finances and the deficits—they see a very clear and intentional path towards their forced closure of their emergency room and hospital.

The impact of a lost hospital or a lack of access to an emergency room on a community is profound. It impacts job creation. It impacts housing. It impacts education. Health care resourcing, when you do it wrong, impacts the entire community and the health and well-being of the people we're elected to serve.

Minden is still fighting, and God love them. When I was there in the summer, I know some of our other members—the member from Oshawa was also there. Those people voted Conservative.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Their whole lives.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Their whole lives. And when we went up there—because we're going into territory which we may win one day or we may not win, but we go there for the people, to have conversations with the people and to bring their voices to this place. What Minden appreciated is that we'll look at the numbers and the cost analysis of bringing a hospital or an emergency room back to Minden, and look at the positives of how that would generate additional revenue for us.

And the case is there for community-based hospitals. They may not be huge institutions, but they'll have a nurse practitioner, a doctor and a nurse, and when your child falls down or gets into an accident, there's a place for them to go. We think that is worth fighting for—don't you think? Why this government is letting these emergency room closures become normalized is beyond me.

As I said at the beginning of these comments, to be in the emergency room and to watch these fancy commercials saying how great Ontario is, time and time again, at a minimum cost of \$8 million—well, there are a lot of places where \$8 million could go.

And when we brought forward the motion, which, ironically, was first introduced by the Conservatives, and in fact, the Minister of Health, today, to reverse the Liberals' partisan advertising policy, where they watered down the Auditor General's powers, to allow this partisan advertising to continue—when we brought forward the very same motion, word for word—and we supported the Conservatives when they brought forward that motion against the Liberals. Then we brought it forward and quoted the members who had talked about how egregious

this advertising policy was, how it was a breach of trust, how the people of Ontario are not buying it—quoted them back to themselves. It was kind of an awkward moment, I have to tell you. But at the end of the day, they voted to maintain this partisan advertising policy. It really defies logic. It really compromises trust in politicians and public servants. It hurts everybody. When people see politicians doubling back on their own principles, doubling down on a policy that doesn't meet any service to Ontario—these commercials are not serving the people of Ontario; they're making them angry.

I guess on some level we should be thanking them. But at the end of the day, those dollars should be going into public service, not partisan advertising.

The Ontario Nurses' Association and the registered nurses' association have countered the Minister of Health's numbers. And I have to focus on health care, because it really does underpin our values as a society. When people have equal access to health care, it is actually our strength—or it used to be our strength. But if you've seen the advertising on the subway and the lack of doctors—you'll know that you can now buy access to a doctor for \$450 a year. This is a slippery slope, something that we are so committed to fighting against.

Our caucus did a town hall on the budget last night, and one fellow from, I think, Pelham said, "I don't have \$450 to buy access to a doctor. That's not what I paid taxes for my entire life. I've invested in this province. I expect access to health care, and I should not have to buy it."

The registered nurses' association have countered this nursing movie that plays in the head of the Minister of Health—that all of these nurses are coming into Ontario. The Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario says that 10,000 nursing vacancies in the province—this is real. They said that 75% of nurses are burnt-out, 69% are considering leaving the profession, and 73% are over capacity.

So I ask you: All of these nursing vacancies in Ontario—why are hospitals not hiring full-time nurses? Why, last year, did this province condone and permit \$1 billion to be spent on agency nurses—\$1 billion on agency nurses? Remember, with those agency nurses—I have got nothing against the nurses themselves—they've actually fled the system because the system was so broken. I don't hold anything against those nurses. I do hold something, though, against the nursing agencies that are skimming 30% of the money for profit, for shareholders. That's 30% on \$1 billion. That money could be going to Minden. It could be going to those emergency rooms to keep them open. It could be going to retraining and retaining. It should be a priority in this government.

So they asked to invest in mandated nurse-patient ratios as it will assist in nurse retention. Our health critic from Nickel Belt has been talking about nurse-to-patient ratios for years now; I would say, higher than a decade.

This is an important thing that the government could legislate. I'm going to say that it's actually happening in BC right now, under an NDP government. Now our Ontario nurses are going to BC, because do you know

what's really important to nurses? Being able to nurse, being able to provide that care that they're trained to do, to share their expertise with their colleagues in a team environment. And you can't do that when you have 26 patients on one floor per one nurse.

I met with RPNs, who are probably one of the most disrespected qualifications in Ontario. These are experienced—primarily women. Their stories ended in tears almost every single day because nobody wants to go to work and feel like they're failing the people they are supposed to be helping. So that is pushing more and more nurses into the agencies.

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Now, those agency nurses, they drop into an open shift, and what nurses tell me is that that nurse doesn't have the continuity of care of the team, is not connected to what has already happened to the patient, and is being dropped in, really, as a temp nurse. To add insult to injury, he or she—primarily she—is making three times as much as the nurse who came every single day prior to work on that patient. On a quality-of-care perspective, how does that make sense? But also, how is it fiscally responsible?

I said this to the finance minister in committee one day: “Why are you voluntarily actually advocating to pay 30% more for health care services? How can Ontario afford that? You are out-Liberaling the Liberals on debt.”

There is a parody going around, I must say, and it is kind of funny, about all of the rhetoric that we heard from government members on deficits: “Deficits, basically, are stealing from future citizens. Debt is putting those costs on future credit cards of your children.” Ironically, that's exactly what this government is doing. This government projected a \$200-million surplus last year. Last year's budget predicted a \$200-million surplus. We have a \$9.8-billion deficit in this year.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: How did they manage that?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Yes. How did you manage that? I'll tell you: You are spending more to get less, and you are intentionally doing that on the health care file.

I have to say, I view budgets as moral documents. I totally buy into it. Budgets should reflect the priorities of the people we're elected to serve. I totally believe, 100%, in servant leadership—that you come to the table and put the problem and the person in the centre, and then you build resources around that and you find solutions. I totally, 100%, buy into that.

What this government has been doing is almost worse than what the Liberals used to do. The Liberals did have a pay-for-access policy, and after the Auditor General identified it, the Integrity Commissioner investigated some of the cash-for-access—if you have cash, you can buy legislation. That was the problem that the PC Party, at the time, countered very strongly. We were also aligned with them. So we brought in this policy around the per-vote subsidy, so that would sort of get this cash-for-access and union donations and corporate donations off the books.

This government has steadfastly reversed those policies one by one, so we're in a whole heap of trouble around ethics in politics in Ontario right now.

We have an RCMP investigation into the greenbelt scandal, which was never about housing. Thank goodness we have the Auditor General, who did a thorough investigation into the insider trading of land. It's true there were no bags of money, but the money was the land. It was worth \$8.3 billion.

At the end of the day, we have a party that is really blurring the lines between the partisan party and the government, and this has been identified by several media experts.

Registered nurses wanted to make this really clear to the government: You can build a bed, but you will never be able to open it without human resources. The direct quote is, “I am emphasizing investment in human resources, not just infrastructure.” The bricks and mortar obviously matter, but the bricks and mortar were open in Minden—but without the people, it's a closed hospital. So we really are going to try to push the government on this.

The Ontario Nurses' Association—I'm going to go through their recommendations really quickly, because I want to move on to another issue: Legislate safe staffing ratios—absolutely, fully support this; drop the appeal of Bill 124—this was before you guys got caught with unconstitutional legislation, but the fact that you were appealing Bill 124 was incredibly insulting; close the wage gap—this is a huge issue for retention of nurses and health care workers; close private clinics, which undermine public health care—absolutely, 150%, shut it down. We can't afford it. It's not delivering service.

Interjection.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you very much to my colleague from Kitchener Centre.

And then: Make all nursing placements paid. This is an interesting idea. There's a cost to going through the health care system. You've made training and education for police officers free. Why are you not valuing nurses in the same way? Why are you not making sure that they have a clear pathway to becoming a registered nurse? Oh, I know you're shaking your head. Is it because they're women?

I can tell you, when I go through my list of everything that you've done to women in the province of Ontario, many of you will leave.

“Since 2018, 35,000 nurses have left the profession.” This is true. And once again, they say that ratios are the only way to address retention. We totally agree.

The other piece, around the doctors: The Ontario Medical Association has been coming to these budget consultations for a number of years. I know there's a little bit of a complicated relationship, and it's not just with the OMA; it's with other organizations as well.

There is a new culture here at Queen's Park, I'd like to say, and I want to put it on the record: If you speak out against the government, if you criticize the government, if you're not thankful enough or grateful enough, there's punishment. It's a punitive culture here at Queen's Park, and we've seen it on several files.

The not-for-profit sector right now—even the Alzheimer Society. They were promised \$1 million in 2020, 2021, 2022. The money never flowed.

That's how you got the \$5.1-billion contingency fund. You created a slush fund on promising money and then not delivering it, which is completely unethical, I have to say.

As I said on *The Agenda* on Tuesday night, one good thing is that the contingency fund is down to half a billion dollars. I like to think that we shamed you into doing your job and investing.

I really hope that the Alzheimer Society gets the money that you promised for three budget cycles. I hope that money gets into the community, because what we learned at budget committee is that, on the Alzheimer's and dementia file, the tsunami is already here. What we heard last year and what we heard again this year is that, in the space of five years, every hospital room down University Avenue will be occupied by someone who is suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's. You can't pretend, in five years' time, to be surprised by this. That's the value of learning from the organizations that actually do the real work in our province.

The Ontario Medical Association came to us with a solution last year. They tell us that they spend 19.1 hours on administrative tasks every week. That is time that they could be seeing patients, and this is time that they want to be spending with patients. We heard from a small-town doctor—and God love him, he's 74 years old. He said, "It is daunting to be the only physician in a community"—because he feels that he cannot retire.

Interjection.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Right? Do you remember that story?

The mental health piece: Phil Klassen from Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences said the challenge is mounting—also not news. Mental health and addictions visits to the Lakeridge Health emergency room have gone up. Mental health apprehensions have increased over the same period of time. Emergency departments struggle to triage these cases. It is not uncommon for these emergency departments to have numerous patients strapped in gurneys. This is a health human resources challenge. They presented last year, and they asked for \$1 million. They have not received the funding. These are choices. Budgets are about choices. So you are choosing to not address a problem for \$1 million in a \$214-billion budget, the biggest budget in the history of the province of Ontario. Budgets are about choices.

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On the mental health front: What's happening to children right now, how they suffered through the pandemic, has to be addressed. Children are waiting 2.5 years for treatment—this is from Children's Mental Health Ontario, CMHO. In the life of a child, two and a half years is a lifetime—some receiving no treatment at all. They said, "For the first time, we are facing a health human resources crisis, especially in northern regions."

I have to say, this budget almost ignores the north altogether. It's like the north doesn't even exist. There was a reannouncement of \$1 billion for the Ring of Fire. This announcement was made in 2014—it's the same money every single year for the last 10 years. We should just call it the ring of smoke and call it a day.

The wage parity, also in mental health—huge issue for retention. Wait-lists for kids were already lengthy before the pandemic, and now the situation is even more dire. They asked for \$140 million over four years to "stabilize, sustain and system build." This year's price tag would be \$35 million for community-based child and youth mental health services.

Again, these are choices that are being made by this government.

This government also talks a lot about infrastructure, like Highway 413 and the Bradford Bypass—and now, because we have a by-election in Milton, a \$3-billion dedicated GO train service. That's almost as good as the Liberals' bullet train that we were promised by the former Minister of Transportation. That's actually a really good example of how this government is making decisions—to be kind, on the back of a napkin. Because there's a by-election in Milton, now we have a promised GO train, with no business plan, no costing—a random \$3 billion. I have to say, when you drop a GO train into a transportation plan that has never been costed, never been talked about—no environmental assessment—we don't even know if it's possible.

I would say there are some real challenges in a dedicated line from Milton down to Union, based on our experience in Kitchener-Waterloo, where, for 10 years, we've been waiting for the long-awaited 15-minute service—we're still at an hour and 47 for the GO train, every couple of hours, if you're lucky. Brampton is getting some increased service, so we're happy for Brampton to get increased services. But it's called the Kitchener line for a reason. Kitchener should also benefit from GO service—never mind that our station was built in World War I and nothing has been changed to it.

Because there's a by-election in Milton—a dedicated GO train, at \$3 billion, which will bump down other transportation projects. And that's actually what has happened with Highway 413 and the Bradford Bypass, for people who are waiting for Highway 7—those plans get bumped down the list. There's only so much that can actually happen.

So you drop in these little pet projects that just happen to benefit some developers along the course, to the tune of billions and billions of dollars, which—they just happened to buy the land, and now we have a highway.

That's how things are proceeding right here in the province of Ontario. And that's why the RCMP is investigating this government—a criminal investigation.

That's why justice matters. That's why the law matters.

That's why legal aid should be mentioned in this budget. Legal aid should be funded. Legal aid is an important part of ensuring people have access to justice.

That's also a good reason to ensure that criminals who hurt people in Ontario, or even steal cars—because now carjackings are a serious issue. I'm sure the helicopters are going to solve it. I'm sure that will happen. Once they get into the justice system, if they don't get access to a judge within that 18 months, then they walk. And let me tell you, those numbers are pretty alarming—who is walking. And

I thought this government was the tough-on-crime kind of government.

Going back to the infrastructure piece: Good Roads. God love Good Roads, Scott Butler. They've made the case for safe infrastructure investment as a cost-saving measure for health care. This is what they said: 50% of the fatalities occurred on rural and northern roads. This is good information for the government to have. Good Roads wants to leverage the lessons learned in other jurisdictions to address this risk—cost-effective solutions like guardrails, paint and lights. He described this as really simple, low-hanging fruit. This is a good solution—to the members who are still here in the Legislature. He said, "Right now road safety in northern Ontario is 'thoughts and prayers'—we hope for the best." I know our northern members have experienced this as they commute back and forth to Queen's Park. Sometimes they're stuck there for hours.

He made a really important point on health care costs. Those accidents that are happening on poorly designed infrastructure in Ontario—listen to this—resulted in 43,000 days of hospital stays, due to accidents on these roads. They are looking for a program for five years where they will look into what is actually happening on the roads. This has been tried in other jurisdictions. It has impacted where investments happen. I'm sure it would benefit Ontarians across the entire province. So that's something that we were looking for. Also, as Good Roads points out, this is low-hanging fruit. This is stuff that is not super-costly, but it has benefits. It also improves the lives of Ontarians who are travelling on these northern roads. This makes sense on many levels.

We heard from so many other folks around the dismantling of the social safety net in Ontario. Ontario used to have a very strong social safety net, if you were experiencing poverty, if you had health issues, if there were mental health challenges, if there were addictions.

All of us know somebody who is struggling with addictions. This government has solutions around safe consumption sites. They have made choices not to grant those licences for those safe consumption sites. You are basically saying that this is not a priority—keeping people healthy. These are sons, daughters, uncles, fathers. It's a really important piece to catching the people who are faltering, who are struggling. I think it's a very callous move, in my estimation, to not grant those licences, even though the health care sector and your own ministry have said that this would save lives and would save health care costs. Fewer people would be in emergency rooms.

I'm going to circle back right now to how this budget really is a lost opportunity to reflect on what people in Ontario said to us.

Going right back to that gender lens—taking action to ensure women and children are better able to access culturally responsive care to strengthen the health of their families, with investments. Even the Healthy Babies Healthy Children Program—these are programs that people care about.

Preventing gender-based violence—the \$13.5 million over three years to enhance initiatives that support women

and youth. This is one part where it looks like new money, but we have to actually dig down and pull back the layers on that.

The Independent Legal Advice for Survivors of Sexual Assault Program, which the government expanded without expanding the budget—there's a small increase in there. We're going to be looking at evaluating that. I think that if someone has the courage to come forward after being assaulted, that justice system should be there, and that legal advice and guidance should be proactive. They shouldn't have to go looking for it.

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I do want to say, just to end on education—because education actually pulled me into politics. When you have kids, you see that the system is being broken. I used to sit over there, as an audience member, when former Premier Harris and Snobelen—I think it was Snobelen who was the Minister of Education—created a crisis. It was such an effective policy that it's still in place today. They created a crisis so that they could create their own made-in-Ontario solutions, and those impacts on our education system are still being felt today.

If you don't get education right, a lot of other things don't fall into place. When I was here protesting, 25 years ago, the cuts to education—a serious government views education as a solution, as, really, an equity policy, because when you get education right, a lot of good things can happen.

I hope the Minister of Education was listening carefully to the voices of informed people, because the word "teachers" is not even mentioned in this budget. I think we should be listening to and learning from the front-line people who have the experience to share with us, as a province.

It is 10:02, and I will end my one-hour lead. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further debate?

Mr. Rick Byers: It's my pleasure to speak this morning on the notice of motion regarding budgetary policy for our government. It is my pleasure to do that. And I'm very pleased to be part of the government now—but budgetary policy going back to 2018, and now to 2024, in the budget released on Tuesday by the minister.

I'll be going through a number of different areas in this budget because I think there are so many important elements to it, whether it's the infrastructure plan—a record investment, over a 10-year period, of \$190 billion; the economic development initiatives that we've been undertaking in so many areas, as a government; and the fiscal environment that we find ourselves in, the economic environment, which has been more challenging than was the case last year. It's certainly a pleasure to work with the Minister of Finance and the Ministry of Finance budget team on this. The minister has been terrific. It has been a pleasure being his PA for the last while. And I look forward to ongoing work with the government.

Touching on a couple of those themes, and starting with the fiscal environment—over the past six years, as our

economy and population have grown, our government has been delivering on our plan to build Ontario. But like the rest of the world, Ontario continues to face economic uncertainty due to high interest rates and global instability. These challenges are putting pressure on Ontario families as well as public finances. High inflation, high Bank of Canada interest rates and the high cost of the federal carbon tax have pushed costs up. Households are struggling.

Faced with the challenges, our government might have chosen to raise taxes, reduce investments and services, or download costs on municipalities. Our government is taking a different approach. We are continuing to invest in Ontario's people and communities. We are doing what's needed to get it done.

Looking more closely at the fiscal situation—like the rest of the world, Ontario continues to face these economic challenges that I mentioned. The outcomes of persistently high interest rates and inflation continue to be unclear. However, Ontario's economy has demonstrated continued resiliency in light of ongoing economic pressure. By taking a responsible approach to fiscal management while creating stronger communities for future generations, the government is continuing to make progress on its plan to build Ontario together.

Ontario's economy performed stronger than expected in 2023, despite continued economic headwinds prompted by elevated consumer price inflation and interest rates. Nearly all private sector forecasters expect continued, but slower, growth in 2024 compared to the projection in the 2023 budget.

Ontario also experienced above-average employment growth in 2023, adding 183,000 net new jobs, a 2.4% increase. Ontario's unemployment rate rose modestly to 5.7% in 2023 but remained low compared to historic averages.

The government plan retains the path to balance despite these fiscal deterioration pressures relative to the 2023 budget and the outlook in the fall 2023 economic outlook and fiscal review. While slower projected growth in 2024 and other factors beyond the province's control are key drivers of the deterioration, the government is continuing to invest in key public services and not raising taxes or fees to increase revenues, at a time when it's important to keep costs down for people and for businesses.

In 2023-24, Ontario is projecting a deficit of \$3.0 billion, this year. Over the medium term, the deficit will increase to \$9.8 billion in 2024-25 and \$4.6 billion in 2025-26, before a surplus of half a billion dollars in 2026-27.

The government will continue to support people and businesses in Ontario and make prudent and targeted investments, as I noted.

Looking at some of the economic assumptions: GDP grew by 1.2% in 2023—stronger than projected in the last year's budget. Nominal GDP growth is expected at 4.1%, higher than the 2.8% projected in the last year's budget. The outlook has been revised compared to the projections in the 2023 budget. Key changes since then include

stronger estimated real and nominal GDP growth in 2023, but slower real and nominal GDP growth in 2024 and 2026, with most of the deterioration this year.

I say all these things because at the end of the day, budgets are about choices. As I noted and as the minister noted in his remarks, faced with these challenges that are evident all over the world, the government could have reduced spending to keep its budget in check, or increased taxes, and we did not do those things. In fact, we kept our spending profile very, very strong and infrastructure spending, which I'll talk about in a short time, very, very strong. So those are the choices that we have made. It's the right, balanced choice. And we will get to balance in the years ahead, so we're looking forward to that.

Some of the measures that are used to determine what makes a prudent plan for governments are measures like, "How big is the debt-to-GDP ratio?" The goal is to treat it below 40%. Well, we're doing that. Right through this piece, it never goes above 40%—38.4% this year, 2023-24; 38.0% in 2023-24 in the final number; and in 2024-25, 39.2%, so below that 40% threshold. That's very important.

The other thing that's important is, the government has done a very good job in its borrowing program. Even though interest rates have gone up, they've done more long-term borrowing, and so interest costs are actually down compared to what was expected in the last year's budget. We're going to pay \$12.8 billion in interest costs in 2023-24; \$13.9 billion in 2024-25; and \$14.7 billion in 2025-26. Those are down from the forecasts of \$14.1 billion, \$14.4 billion and \$15.1 billion. So I give the government full credit for having the forecast and the propensity to extend its borrowing program so that there is less volatility in the borrowing program—very, very prudent and very, very well done.

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The overall fiscal plan: I mentioned the deficit numbers. The other thing that I find is very strong about this budget and the government's approach is that we're showing the benefits of the economic development that's happening in Ontario. Overall revenues, which were \$192 billion in 2022-23, are rising to over \$200 billion this year—\$205 billion—without any new taxes. Government revenue will go up, and there's always a tension there—"Hey, you're taking too much from my pocket"—but it's so important. That shows the underlying strength of the Ontario economy. That's what it's based on. It's the underlying economic strength that's generating these revenues—whether it's for corporations, personal taxes or other elements that are behind it—not tax increases. That's very, very important.

At the same time, our program spending has continued its very substantial and solid growth. Let's look at some of the sectors. Health care: \$75.1 billion in 2022-23; up to \$85 billion this year, 2024-25—a \$10-billion increase in health care funding. That is so fundamental to what we're doing. I'll talk about the infrastructure shortly and all the other measures. But that's a great measure of the priorities that our government is placing on health care.

Education: \$33.6 billion to \$37.6 billion in that same period—a substantial increase in spending. Post-secondary, children, community and social services—on and on and on. This government is treating these areas—continues to treat them—as a key priority and is able to accommodate those very substantial spending increases in our economic plan. It ultimately leads to a balanced budget in the out years.

These are the choices that we have made—maintain our support for these key programs; maintain the priorities for the people of Ontario; have a balanced and prudent approach in, frankly, a difficult economic environment. That’s the basis on which this budget has been done, and I’m very pleased with the approach that has been taken.

I want to now talk about infrastructure and our government’s plan to build. This is an area where, again, I am very, very encouraged by the approach we’ve taken. Normally, governments will make decisions as far as they can see towards the next election—“Hey, let’s just do what we need to do to get re-elected.” Well, that’s not the approach we’ve taken. We were going a full decade out, 10 years out, with \$190 billion of investment in infrastructure over the next 10 years—a huge, huge number. More importantly, this year, it’s \$26.2 billion in the next 12 months; that’s over \$2 billion per month in infrastructure spending in the province of Ontario—massive numbers. These are also investments that aren’t going to be there just for tomorrow, next year and when they’re built. These are legacy, generational investments that are needed. And whether it’s in health care or transportation or transit, they’re so, so important to the economy and to our province.

Let’s look first at transit: over the next 10 years, \$67.5 billion in transit—just massive, massive numbers.

With GO Transit, we’re transforming the GO rail network to improve access and convenience across the greater Golden Horseshoe by increasing two-way service; making investments to extend GO Transit rail service to Bowmanville; extending the Hazel McCallion light rail transit line; expanding service to the Milton GO line by adding train trips there; increasing frequency between Union and Niagara; more express service between Hamilton, Burlington, Toronto—on and on and on. These are fundamental and such important investments in our transit community.

Let’s look at subways. One of the great things that this government did early in its mandate was upload construction of subways. I was on the board of—

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I apologize to the member, but unfortunately—or fortunately—it’s time for members’ statements.

Debate deemed adjourned.

MEMBERS’ STATEMENTS

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Mr. Aris Babikian: I was delighted to participate in a number of events to celebrate Black History Month and

pay tribute to the contribution of the Black community in Canada, and to applaud their impressive achievements. This year’s theme was “Black Excellence: A Heritage to Celebrate; a Future to Build.”

We are proud of the Black community and their essential role in raising Canada’s global status to such high standards. The impacts of Canada’s Black community in education, medicine, art, culture, public service, economic development, politics, human rights and so many other fields are too immense to mention here. Their sacrifices made Canada a beacon of democracy and human rights and paved the way for other persecuted people from all over the world to find refuge in Canada and get a new lease on life.

We are grateful for your inspiring vision and influence.

In addition to joining my Scarborough colleagues and organizing our own celebration in Scarborough, I attended the plumbers and pipefitters union and International Union of Painters and Allied Trades’ celebrations at Queen’s Park. I also attended events at the TAIBU Community Health Centre, Tropicana Community Services, and Afroglobal Television.

JUSTICE SYSTEM

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Under this Conservative government, Ontario’s justice system is in shambles—everywhere, access to justice is denied routinely. Ontario courts rank dead last in case backlogs and wait times nationwide. The Conservatives play politics with justice, appointing unqualified cronies, including a gun lobbyist, to select their next round of judges.

Delays and denials of justice ruin lives. Criminals walk free, and the innocent suffer behind bars.

This isn’t just about funding; it’s about setting priorities.

The government’s budget ignores the crisis in our courts. This government released its budget two days ago. I scoured the budget. I was looking for funding in our courts, and it was not there. Not once did it mention bail, pretrial detention or court backlogs.

It’s easy for Ontario survivors to give up when their own government has given up on them.

Today in the chamber sit two extraordinary women, Cait Alexander and Emily Ager, who have individually endured violent crimes against them, only to have their cases tossed out because of court delays. Devastated, they watched their accused walk free and back into the community.

Cait and Emily are here to demand tangible solutions, starting with the budget; not hollow assurances from the Premier and the Attorney General.

We must thank Cait and Emily for their incredible strength, for coming here today, and for sharing their painful stories once again in hopes that this government will actually come up with solutions and fix our broken courts.

TAXATION

Mr. Deepak Anand: The number one issue that I hear from the residents of Mississauga–Malton is affordability. With the increase in inflation, mortgage interest rates and economic uncertainty, it is resulting in stress to the residents.

And then, on April 1, the upcoming 23% increase in the carbon tax by the federal Liberals intensifies this burden, creating a vicious cycle of rising costs that affects every aspect of daily life. Increased gas prices lead to higher costs for everything from groceries to borrowing, resulting in inflation that further strains household budgets.

While Ontario is diligently working towards its 2030 greenhouse gas reduction targets, with emissions already declining 26.1% since 2005, initiatives like the green steel project exemplify our commitment to sustainable practices. This project alone will mitigate millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions annually, equivalent to removing almost over one million cars from the roads.

Therefore, it is imperative that all MPPs send a clear message to their MPs asking them to stand with their residents. Let's prioritize affordability and sustainability without further burdening hard-working families. Tell the federal government to reconsider its approach and scrap the burdensome carbon tax now.

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UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE FUNDING

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Universities and colleges are incredibly important institutions. They are primary sites of research, and they are where the young and not-so-young go to learn critical thinking and specific subject and occupational knowledge.

Tragically, post-secondary education in Ontario has been underfunded for the last 20 years, at 43% less than the national average. Even with the injection of \$1.3 billion divided over three years amongst our 60 public post-secondary institutions, Ontario will still be dead last.

To be clear, no one wants to see tuition increased. Domestic tuition is far too high, and making up the difference by charging international students exorbitant fees has been, frankly, shameful. Far too many students—domestic and international—have to take on part-time jobs just to survive when they should be able to focus their time and energy on learning.

On the faculty side, class sizes keep going up, as do the number of faculty on short-term, low-wage contracts, who do not have the time to support students outside the classroom.

Students and faculty are being squeezed on all sides, and the effects are showing up in mental health crises.

The Ford Conservatives are undermining all our futures.

Research cannot flourish and students cannot reach their full potential when our colleges and universities are collapsing.

We can and must do better.

BANCROFT FITNESS

Mr. Ric Bresee: A few weeks ago, I had the chance to attend a funding announcement at Bancroft Fitness. This \$71,700 capital grant from the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport through the Trillium fund allowed them to upgrade their HVAC system to ensure a safe exercise environment and allow more comfortable exercise temperatures for their brand new hydrotherapy pool.

Bancroft Fitness is a unique environment. It operates as a not-for-profit, small-town-style gym. Residents of Bancroft and the surrounding area can join the gym for a minimal membership fee which includes typical group classes like yoga, meditation, high- and low-impact fitness, and more.

Speaker, what's truly unique about this facility is the connection between health and fitness championed by Dr. Carolyn Brown over 20 years ago. She had a patient who was suffering from soft tissue pain after a car accident, and she realized that she couldn't use medicine to help that patient, so she partnered with a kinesiologist, Angela Carrera, to create a new fitness centre.

Bancroft Fitness promotes healthy fitness habits for individuals of all needs and all activity levels in direct partnership with the Bancroft Community Family Health Team. This is the first fitness facility in Ontario that partners directly with an Ontario family health team. They provide programs like cardiac and pulmonary rehabilitation, where they provide exercise, education and counselling. This is health care innovation.

I want to express my congratulations to Bancroft Fitness on the improvements to your facility, and my thanks to the ministry and the Ontario Trillium fund for their support.

ADDICTION SERVICES

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I rise today with great concern over the inaction and provincial defunding of urgently needed supervised consumption services in Ontario. This will result in increased overdose deaths and undue burden on emergency response services, and will deny the rights of access to essential health care interventions and wrap-around supports for people dealing with addictions.

In 2018, when this Conservative government came to power, they arbitrarily capped funding to only 21 sites. Six years later, despite overwhelming need and local support, only 17 sites have been approved and funded. Now, even this handful of sites are under imminent threat of closure due to lack of funding.

Communities across this province are declaring states of emergency over this crisis. Sites are operating through the sacrifices of burnt-out front-line workers, keeping doors open through piecemeal donations. This is for basic life-saving services.

There were an estimated 3,644 drug-related deaths just last year in Ontario and over 20,000 deaths under this government's watch.

The Conservative government is literally abandoning the most vulnerable and marginalized people in our province.

The overdose crisis is impacting many in my community of Parkdale–High Park and people across Toronto. But do you know what, Speaker? It's worse in northern Ontario and in southwestern Ontario. It's smaller cities that are hardest hit by this crisis—many communities that Conservative MPPs represent.

These are preventable deaths. The government must stop ignoring this crisis. It's not going to go away unless you do something about it.

MEDICAL ISOTOPES

Mr. Rick Byers: Colleagues, I want to update you this morning on the ongoing, exciting developments in the world of medical isotopes. As members know, for over half a century, Canada has been a world leader in the development, production and use of life-saving medical isotopes in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer, while also tackling some of the greatest health science challenges, including equipment and PPE sterilization, fighting the Zika virus, and pharmaceutical advancements.

In 2023, the Canadian Nuclear Isotope Council launched *Isotopes for Hope: Canadian Leadership Needed Now More Than Ever*, with the goal of doubling Canadian production of isotopes by 2030. “The world needs more Canada” is core to the CNIC’s message, as they have unique capabilities, people and infrastructure for our Canadian isotope ecosystem. They recently launched the first *Isotopes for Hope* podcast series to share perspectives from Canadians who are inspiring leaders, turning this vision into a reality and delivering important progress to people around the world who are counting on Canada as a global isotope superpower.

Last week, this important message was brought directly to Queen’s Park at an excellent medical isotopes reception. The members from Kitchener South–Hespeler and Mississauga Centre have been very active in this exciting work and were there to share their message.

This ongoing work is absolutely excellent for Ontario, and we look forward to ongoing leadership and collaboration right here in Ontario to promote medical isotopes.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: Based on the overwhelming scientific consensus and lived experience, I know that climate change is real, and I believe it is our responsibility to act. Otherwise, it will be our children and our grandchildren who will be dealing with disaster after disaster.

It is a shame to see another budget that does nothing about the climate. This government loves to point fingers but refuses to lift a finger to do something themselves. The only climate measure they’ve taken, the cancelling of cap and trade, has been a disaster. It cost the government \$3 billion in penalties, and it shifted the cost of carbon from corporate polluters to the people of Ontario—an extra \$300 a year.

This government doesn’t care about the climate, and they don’t care about affordability. What will it take to

have this government take the threat to the health, safety and security of Ontarians seriously?

This recent budget has done nothing to help Ontario families with mounting crises in affordability, health care, housing or the climate.

This government does nothing but point fingers, write letters and blame others so they can continue to reward wealthy, connected corporate insiders at the expense of everyone else.

TAXATION

Mr. Stephen Crawford: April 1, as we all know, is April Fool’s Day. But do you know what is not funny? On April 1, the residents of Oakville, along with the rest of the province, will wake up to life being more expensive and more unaffordable.

My constituents in Oakville have reached out to me, concerned with the rising cost of living—especially the rising federal carbon tax. Just last week, I had residents come up to me at a local grocery store and mention how much the carbon tax hurts them. They are feeling the extra costs for basic activities, such as driving their kids to soccer practice.

At the Oakville Meals on Wheels grant recognition program event I was at a week ago, residents were really appreciative of the funding they received, but they were very upset and worried by the rising tax hike coming on April 1. For those volunteers, the hike for gas makes each delivery to vulnerable people that much more expensive.

1030

I am proud that our government, under the leadership of our finance minister and Premier Ford, is supporting families and businesses by proposing to extend the gas and fuel tax cuts until December 31, 2024. We know every dollar helps, and this gas tax cut is another way to help keep the costs for Ontarians down.

But that’s not all. Licence plate renewal fees and stickers—saved vehicle owners \$3.3 billion. And we launched the One Fare program, which will save commuters in Oakville \$1,600 per year.

As April 1 is around the corner, we continue to call on the federal government to scrap the tax.

ONTARIO BUDGET

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I was truly proud to see that Windsor and Tecumseh were once again front and centre in our government’s affordability-focused budget.

As this House is aware, in 2017 the then Liberal government announced that planning funding for our new regional acute-care hospital would be stopped in its tracks with the 2018 budget.

The contrast couldn’t be clearer: Premier Ford committed to seeing the Windsor-Essex regional acute-care hospital, and this budget sets out the hospital procurement for 2025.

This budget also builds the new Banwell Road and E.C. Row interchange, right at the boundary of Windsor and

Tecumseh—a project that successive governments of all stripes outright ignored for 40 years, until this government.

This budget also develops the future Lauzon Parkway and 401 interchange, supports thousands of new jobs at NextStar and Bobaek, invests in local broadband, grows access to primary health care and long-term care, and says yes to our new local schools, including the Beacon Heights Public School and Eastview Horizon Public School.

These investments make our region stronger than ever.

I want to say thank you to Premier Ford and the Ontario government for doing the heavy lifting for Windsor-Essex that just never happened under NDP representation and Liberal governments.

I encourage all of my Windsor colleagues to support these great investments in the budget.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: None of us can take our place here in the Ontario Legislature without the support of our family.

I'm delighted to welcome my son Seth Harrison Kerzner to the Legislature today.

MPP Jill Andrew: I'm proud to welcome OPSEU Local 535 AGO workers to Queen's Park today: Paul Ayers, local president; Ruth Jones, who works in facilities; Teya Vitko, bargaining team member; Charles Audu, local vice-president; and Mark Thornberry, bargaining team member. Welcome to your House, for the love of the arts.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: I'm really proud to announce our page Justin. His mom, Estelle Chapin-Ker, is here today with her husband, Jeff Ker, and Onikay Neil, who is the godmother of our page Justin.

Welcome to the House today.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'd like to welcome members of our University–Rosedale team today: Doga Koroglu, Matthew Cooke, Molly Tarsey, Leah Wahl, Madeleine Vogelaar, and Kirsten Snider. It's wonderful working with you. Thanks for being here.

M^{me} Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Au nom de la ministre des Affaires francophones, j'aimerais bien souhaiter la bienvenue à une délégation du Conseil scolaire catholique MonAvenir. Avec nous aujourd'hui, nous avons des élèves des écoles secondaires catholiques Saint-Charles-Garnier à Whitby, Académie catholique Mère-Teresa à Hamilton, Saint-Frère-André à Toronto, Monseigneur-de-Charbonnel, Renaissance à Aurora et Maple; ainsi que M^{me} Geneviève Grenier, présidente du conseil; M^{me} Nathalie Dufour-Séguin, vice-présidente du conseil; et M^{me} Nicole Mollot, directrice de l'éducation. Je souhaite la bienvenue à vous tous.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: It gives me great pleasure to welcome folks who have travelled from Milton here this morning and who are part of the group called Action Milton. We have George Minakakis, the board chair; Sharon Barkley; Heather Murch; Cindy Lunau; Gary

Williams; Monica Minakakis; Scott Travers; and Noah Zatzman.

Thank you for coming today, and welcome to Queen's Park.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: I have the parents of page Owen from Oakville here today. We have Ji Li and Frank Zeng. Welcome to Queen's Park.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: We are joined in this House by some extraordinary individuals—survivors and advocates to end gender-based violence: Emily Ager and her husband, Brandon Quint, as well as Cait Alexander and her mother, Carolyn Alexander, and Tom Alexander.

Welcome to your House.

Mrs. Robin Martin: I want to introduce visitors from my riding in the gallery: Andrey Golubovsky and his daughter Maria.

Thank you for coming.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I want to introduce Samantha Dangubic, who is an intern and a former staff person, as of today. Today is her last day.

On a lighter note, Samantha has recently designed a most wonderful design on a tote bag for me, and it features Toronto's beloved streetcars and raccoons.

KRAFT HOCKEYVILLE 2024

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Algoma–Manitoulin has a point of order he wants to raise.

Mr. Michael Mantha: As I look upon all of us in here, I look at you as being part of my family, and also team Ontario. And I want to wish you all a happy Easter weekend.

We have an opportunity to vote for Elliot Lake to become Kraft Hockeyville 2024. Elliot Lake is one of four who are reaching the finals—the only Ontario finalist. You are team Ontario. Voting starts in less than 24 hours. So I'm asking you, on March 29 and March 30, vote for Elliot Lake to become Kraft Hockeyville 2024.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. It's technically not a point of order, but it's important information nonetheless.

CORRECTION OF RECORD

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Etobicoke–Lakeshore.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: I just have to apologize to page Julian. I said his name wrong. It's Julian, not Justin. I apologize to his family. I just have a lot in my head right now.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): It is in order to correct your record. Thank you very much.

That concludes our introduction of visitors.

HOUSE SITTINGS

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I beg to inform the House that, pursuant to standing order 9(h), the Clerk has received written notice from the government House leader

indicating that a temporary change in the weekly meeting schedule of the House is required, and therefore, the House shall commence at 9 a.m. on Monday, April 8, 2024, for the proceeding orders of the day.

QUESTION PERIOD

ONTARIO BUDGET

Ms. Catherine Fife: My question is for the Premier.

As I continue to review this Conservative government's budget, I'm left with very serious questions.

Does this budget make rent affordable for renters?

Interjection: No.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Does it make groceries cheaper?

Interjection: No.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Does it effectively address the unethical backlog in our court system?

Interjection: No.

Ms. Catherine Fife: To the Premier: This budget wasn't made for the people of Ontario. So who exactly does this out-of-touch budget serve?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To reply, the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Finance and member for Oakville.

1040

Mr. Stephen Crawford: I'm not sure if the member opposite actually read the budget and read what people are saying about budget 2024, because what you're saying is the complete opposite of what we're hearing and what the people of Ontario are saying.

This is a budget that puts the people of Ontario first. The people of Ontario, like the rest of the world, continue to face economic challenges. Costs are up. People are struggling. And at this point in time, at this juncture, we could either slow down or we could continue to build—build an economy, build infrastructure, build housing, build health care—and put money back in the pockets of the people of Ontario.

This is a budget that's getting it done for the province of Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Speaker, bragging about doubling down on failed policies is definitely not leadership.

I know who this budget is not made for. This budget wasn't made for post-secondary students or educators. This budget wasn't made for teachers or nurses or 1.7 million renters.

Funding in this budget is not going towards making life more affordable. It won't improve wages for workers. It won't keep post-secondary institutions afloat. It won't make \$10-a-day child care a reality for so many struggling families in this province.

Since this budget was not made for struggling Ontarians, Premier, tell us which corporations and private

companies are set to benefit from this government's budget. That's your priority.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll remind the members to make their comments through the Chair.

The member for Oakville.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Again, the member opposite is way off base.

This is a budget that is focused on affordability for the people of Ontario. This is a government that is getting it done for the people of Ontario.

We have the great Associate Minister of Transportation bringing in the One Fare program—\$1,600 in savings for commuters across the GTA, whether they're in Oakville, in York region, in Burlington. Wherever they are, that is an enormous savings for people who are travelling. Many of the staff who work at Queen's Park actually take transit. They're going to save a lot of money. You go and tell them that you don't support that.

We've also indexed ODSP to inflation; we've had the largest increase in the history of Ontario.

We're helping 100,000 additional seniors through the GAINS program.

We've cut the renewal fees for licence stickers and licence plates.

And, of course, we are lowering the gas tax here in Ontario, which is going to help everybody.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The final supplementary?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Speaker, I certainly wouldn't be bragging about legislated poverty in Ontario.

I do want to say that this government says that this budget is fiscally responsible. In reality, the government projected a \$200-million surplus and instead delivered a \$10-billion deficit. They have slashed post-secondary education by \$425 million while almost half of Ontario's universities are running deficits. The justice system is broken in Ontario—just ask Cait and Emily—and there's no mention of legal aid anywhere in this budget.

Speaker, to the Premier: What will it take for this Conservative government to listen to the people of Ontario and fund the services that they rely on?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

The member for Oakville.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Again, I would like to highlight some of the initiatives the government of Ontario is taking in budget 2024, because perhaps the member didn't read it in her notes.

We are continuing to build Ontario, and we're doing it in a fiscally responsible way. We have a path to balance, unlike every other government pretty much in Canada and the federal government.

We are investing \$1 billion in municipal housing funding infrastructure—municipalities asked for this; we are delivering.

We are quadrupling the Housing-Enabling Water Systems Fund.

Of course, as I mentioned, we are extending the gas tax cut. Go ask the residents in your riding if they are against that tax savings.

We're also adding an additional \$100 million to the Skills Development Fund so we can continue to build Ontario.

NORTHERN HEALTH CARE

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Last month in northwestern Ontario, Nishnawbe Aski Nation declared a health state of emergency.

There continues to be unnecessary suffering and needless deaths across Kiiwetinoong.

Speaker, what page in the 2024 budget addresses this crisis?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Deputy Premier and Minister of Health.

Hon. Sylvia Jones: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak about some of the investments that we have been able to make in northern Ontario.

We're investing more in northern Ontario health than any other previous government.

Our plan is investing in infrastructure, in boosting health human resources and adding educational supports for the future. We have, of course, expanded the Northern Ontario School of Medicine—over a hundred additional seats available, and 60% of those, of course, are set aside for primary care, the family doctors we so desperately need across Ontario, and particularly, acutely, in northern Ontario.

We'll continue to make those investments because we know that when people have access to primary care multi-disciplinary teams in their communities, it makes an impact, and it ensures that people have the care they need closer to home.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: The answer does not answer the question about the health crisis.

Speaker, hospitals across northwestern Ontario are struggling to retain surgeons.

Patients in Sioux Lookout will be sent further away from home for surgeries that they need.

Again, what page in the 2024 budget addresses the crisis?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: Specifically, as it relates to this week's budget, which was an incredible endorsement of the investments that we have already made and will continue to make, we have, specifically to Indigenous and northern communities, supports of \$94 million over the next three years. What does that actually translate to? That's maintaining mental health and addiction services. That's ongoing Indigenous First Nations public health programs. That's early detection for foot complications—like diabetes. We are making the investments.

I hope the member opposite will continue to advocate, but I also hope that they will acknowledge the investments that we are making in northern Ontario and across Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The final supplementary.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: In northwestern Ontario, Highway 17 was closed this morning between Dryden and Kenora. Yesterday, it was closed between Ignace and Thunder Bay.

Speaker, what page in the 2024 budget addresses highway standards in the north?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Associate Minister of Transportation.

Hon. Vijay Thanigasalam: Road safety is a paramount focus for this government and with this transportation minister—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The final supplementary was unrelated to the first question and the supplementary—and they have to be. They have to flow, and they have to be related.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: In northwestern Ontario—do you want me to ask again, or—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): No, I think we have to move forward.

The next question.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: The courts have confirmed that the Ford government owes the public answers about why they skipped an environmental assessment for the mega spa planned at Ontario Place. The judge said the matter was of significant public law interest, despite government lawyers arguing that the challenge should be thrown out.

My question to the Premier is, will you halt all redevelopment activities on the Therme site and conduct an environmental assessment?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The parliamentary assistant and member for Brampton West.

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: This particular matter is before the courts, so it would be inappropriate for me to comment on this at this time.

Mr. Speaker, let me remind this House and the public that it was the previous Liberal government, always supported by that NDP, that left this historic place, Ontario Place, in a state of neglect and disrepair.

What this government is doing is bringing Ontario Place back on the map—and will bring a remarkable, world-class destination for families to enjoy, and a brand new amphitheatre, a wellness centre, a water park facility, and a brand new science centre. Not only that; it will create thousands of new jobs and will attract four million to six million visitors annually. We are bringing an Ontario Place and a science centre that the people of Ontario will be proud of. We will bring it back on the world map.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

1050

Mr. Chris Glover: Mr. Speaker, I really have to disagree with the member opposite. This government is not bringing back Ontario Place. They're giving it away in a 95-year lease to a private, for-profit spa company. And in order to do that, they passed Bill 154, which attempted to give the ministers and government officials the power to commit acts of malfeasance, misrepresentation, breach of trust and bad faith with immunity.

So my question is, what is in this dirty deal with Therme that Ontario Place for All is having to take this government to court to make them obey Ontario's laws?

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: If the opposition were ever to form a government and actually function effectively, they would understand how this process works. The process was competitive and fair, as it should be. But do you know what, Mr. Speaker? I highly doubt that the opposition will ever be able to form a government with this kind of approach, which is anti-infrastructure, which is anti-building, which is anti making life affordable for the people of this province. The legacy of the opposition is leaving our historic places, like Ontario Place and the science centre, in a state of neglect and disrepair—voting against transit, voting against hospitals, opposing highways like Highway 413 and the Bradford Bypass.

Mr. Speaker, the legacy of this Premier and this government is to bring our iconic destinations back to life, making them remarkable, world-class destinations for people of all—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Stop the clock. Members will please take their seats.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order. The House will come to order.

Start the clock. The next question.

TAXATION

Mr. Billy Pang: My question is for the Minister of Energy. The carbon tax does nothing to reduce emissions. It only punishes the hard-working people of the province.

While the opposition NDP and the independent Liberals continue to support this harmful tax and vote against measures that provide Ontarians with affordable and reliable energy, our government is taking action and getting it done for the people of our province.

Last summer, the minister released Powering Ontario's Growth and outlined our plan to continue building our province's clean-energy advantage. I know there are major projects and procurements that are already under way.

Can the minister please tell the House how our government is providing Ontarians with clean energy as we fight against the disastrous carbon tax?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks to the member for Markham for that great question this morning. We are powering's Ontario growth at the Ministry of Energy. Last summer, I unveiled our plan, named Powering Ontario's Growth, which is investing in more emissions-free, base-

load, reliable nuclear power at places like Bruce Power, Pickering and Darlington. Small modular reactors are going into the ground right now, as we speak, in Darlington—the largest procurement for energy storage in Canada's history. New, non-emitting generation is part of competitive procurements.

One thing that I couldn't help but notice this morning was that the queen of the carbon tax, Bonnie Crombie, was in the media studio having a press conference that was really like a Saturday Night Live skit. Actually, it was more like a Seinfeld episode; it was a press conference about nothing.

Here I am answering question number 273 in this House about the carbon tax, something that 80% of Canadians are opposed to, but these Liberals and the federal Liberals are going to increase the carbon tax by a whopping 23% on—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

The supplementary question.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you to the minister for his response.

It is sad to see both the NDP and the Liberals, who are yelling in this House, demonstrate no willingness to support initiatives that provide Ontarians with affordable and clean energy. The reality is that they don't have a plan to improve affordability and the cost of living in Ontario. All they care about is pushing their agenda of raising our taxes.

Life is already expensive for the hard-working people of our province. They need more support and more financial relief from our governments, not more punitive tax hikes. That's why the federal government must scrap the carbon tax, and they must do it as soon as possible.

Can the minister please explain what our government is doing to protect Ontarians from the costly carbon tax?

Hon. Todd Smith: Mr. Speaker, the member from Markham is right; we're not raising the carbon tax. As a matter of fact, in our budget delivered on Tuesday, we're eliminating taxes. We're eliminating fees.

The members of the Liberal caucus—there are some smart people over there, but I just can't understand how they don't realize that what is happening on Monday—Easter Monday, April Fool's Day, carbon tax day in Ontario. Their counterparts, Justin Trudeau and the Liberals, supported by the queen of the carbon tax, Bonnie Crombie, are going to be increasing the carbon tax on Canadians by a whopping 23% on Monday.

Mr. Speaker, 80% of Canadians are opposed to an increase in the carbon tax because they understand what it's going to mean for the prices at the pumps, at the grocery stores and on their home heating bills.

The member from Ottawa South and the queen of the carbon tax have to understand that this is a losing proposition. We're driving the cost of living down in Ontario, making life more affordable. They should—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The next question.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Ms. Jessica Bell: My question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. The Conservatives have until tomorrow to submit a better affordable housing action plan or miss out on \$357 million in federal funding. The minister likes to say this is unfair, but the facts speak for themselves. This government is on track to build just 8% of the homes they said they would build by 2025.

My question is this: Is this government going to submit a better affordable housing action plan tomorrow, or are Ontarians going to miss out?

Hon. Paul Calandra: To be clear, Ontario has hit 60% of the target. It is, of course, a 10-year target; we are entering year 6. The federal government changed the goalposts on this one and decided that the 60% is actually 28%. We've also hit 170% of our rehabilitation/renovation progress.

As the member knows, housing of this type is done through our service managers and our municipal partners. Our municipal partners have also written to the federal government to come firmly onside with our position that not only are we meeting our targets and not only can we meet our targets over the next four and a half years, but we have exceeded our targets in other areas.

So I would ask the member opposite if she would—instead of standing with the federal Liberals, who are going to reduce funding by \$357 million—stand with us and with 444 municipalities across the province who are saying they have met their targets and will—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. The supplementary question.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, municipalities and housing providers in Ontario want this government to stop playing the blame game and start taking action.

Ontario has the worst housing crisis and homelessness crisis we've had in decades. It has never been more expensive to rent or buy a home; even your own budget says that.

My question is this: Is this government going to fix up and resubmit a credible affordable housing action plan, or are we all going to miss out?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will take their seats.

1100

Hon. Paul Calandra: Just to add a little more colour to this, the money that the Liberals, supported by the NDP, are not transferring to us is \$357 million of the approved plan. We did a plan. The federal government approved that plan. We have paid for the plan. We have done what we said in the plan, and the federal government has decided that they're no longer going to live up to their end of the bargain. This isn't about future money. This is about money that has already been approved, committed under a plan that they approved. That is the difference.

What the member is suggesting that we do is go back in time, change the plan that was approved by this House,

that was approved by the federal government, that we have paid for.

We are asking the federal government to live up to the commitment that they made to the people of the province of Ontario.

The plan, going forward, will meet our targets.

She should stand with us and with 444 municipalities that want—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. The next question.

TAXATION

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: My question is for the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry. The federal carbon tax is making everything more expensive for everyone in this province. People in my riding of Newmarket–Aurora and across Ontario are paying more for groceries, for services and for fuel since the implementation of this disastrous tax.

To make matters worse, the federal Liberals are increasing costs at the pump, from about 14.31 cents per litre to about 37.43 cents per litre in 2030. This is punishing drivers across the province, especially in rural areas, where they rely more heavily on their vehicles. No one should have to choose between filling up their gas tanks or filling up their pantries.

Can the minister please tell this House how our government is supporting Ontario's rural communities through this challenging time?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you to the member from Newmarket–Aurora for the question. She's a great, great member.

We know that this carbon tax is about to go up a staggering 23% on April 1. That's just next week, just a few days away. We know the provincial Liberals support this hike.

The Ontario Liberals, ruled by the queen of the carbon tax, Bonnie Crombie, refuse to call on the federal Liberals to get rid of the punitive carbon tax. In fact, if Bonnie Crombie is the queen, that makes the independent Liberals the princes and the princesses of the carbon tax. We've got carbon tax nobility in our midst.

To the great communities in rural Ontario: Don't worry. Our government is saying yes to rural Ontario, keeping energy costs down. We're cutting the gas tax, investing in northern Ontario through our biomass program—\$60 million going to strengthen the forestry sector and create jobs in the north. Our government will continue to build and support rural communities across Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you to the minister for that response.

The previous Liberal government neglected rural communities for 15 years. Their disrespect for rural Ontarians continues to this day.

Individuals and families are greatly concerned about what the future will hold as the federal government continues to impose further tax hikes.

It is impossible to understand how the federal Liberals and their provincial counterparts are content to pass additional costs on to people who are already stretching their incomes.

The carbon tax effects are widespread, including negative impacts to industries in the natural resources sector.

Can the minister please explain why our province is better off without the federal carbon tax?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Again, thanks to the member for the question.

It's clear from the carbon tax that the Liberals across the way just don't want anything to be built in Ontario. It just shocks me how completely out of touch the members opposite are to think that a 23% increase in the carbon tax is acceptable and a way to build Ontario.

But it's no surprise that the Liberals and the NDP aren't listening to the people. Why expect them to start now? The people have been talking about the carbon tax for years, and the members opposite have done absolutely nothing about it.

But we're doing something about it. We're extending the removal of the gas tax—14 cents on every litre, ensuring that resources can move across Ontario to get houses, roads, transit lines built for Ontarians.

We're building the province at a rate the queen of the carbon tax, Bonnie Crombie, and her Liberals could never imagine. We'll continue to do that and continue to support Ontarians and the building of this great province every step of the way, despite the carbon tax.

JUSTICE SYSTEM

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: My question is to the Premier.

Today, we are joined by two courageous women, Emily Ager and Cait Alexander. Both of them experienced horrific gender-based violence. The police investigated, evidence was collected, charges were laid, and they took their accused to court, only to have their cases then thrown out due to unconstitutional delays. Cait frequently contacted the courts to remind them of the looming deadline and ask for a hearing date, only for her case to be then scheduled after 18 months, after the Jordan deadline had passed. When she pointed this out, they said that nothing could be done.

Violent abusers and rapists walk free in our communities today. The government's underfunding of the court system has led to that.

Will the Premier commit today, in front of Cait and Emily and their families, to fund the courts, to clear the backlogs, so survivors can have their actual day in court?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

The Attorney General.

Hon. Doug Downey: I don't have the luxury of being able to address individual cases, so I will talk in broader terms.

We are doing everything we can. We're investing in the courts. I can tell you, the opposition tells the stories, but we're taking the action. We have hired over 340 individuals in the court system, be it crown prosecutors, victim-witness assistants, court employees, court staff and bail vettors. It is incredible, the amount of resources this government is putting into the system to deal with the lack of progress that happened under the Liberals, previous to us.

Mr. Speaker, here's the real challenge: Will the member opposite, in front of these individuals, stand up and tell them that they will support the budget that says we are investing \$6 million over three years for the children at risk of exploitation; \$4.5 million over three years for the victim quick response team; \$2.5 million over three years to increase the outreach to children and youth; \$27 million over three years to enhance sexual assault and domestic violence services; and \$6.5 million over three years to support—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. The supplementary question.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Speaker, it's clear that this government says that they're sticking to their plan with their budget, but their plan is actually failing survivors like Emily and Cait. This government released its budget only two days ago. Court backlogs, bail and pretrial detention were never mentioned—not once.

Emily's rape trial began, but it could not finish because the timeline ran out. Yesterday, Emily told me that her legal and court part of her story is now over. She's now fighting for all survivors after her so that they can have a chance to have their day in court.

How many other survivors have to come forward to tell their painful stories again and again before this Premier and government is willing to admit that they've let them down, that the courts are in shambles and they refuse to do anything about it?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

The Attorney General.

Hon. Doug Downey: That's more indignation without action. I didn't hear a yes to supporting this budget.

We are supporting all parts of the system. We recently put \$18.7 million into 400 gender-based service providers. You voted against it. We put additional money into emergency shelters, to counselling and to 24-hour services. You did nothing; you voted against it. Indignation does not pay the bills.

We are supporting the victims in this system. We're adding resources, we're adding capital, we're adding the staff and the people who need to make the system run. It was left in shambles by the previous Liberal government, supported by the NDP. And now they vote against every single improvement to protect the vulnerable in our society.

1110

FOREST FIREFIGHTING

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: Last year, from April to October, 441,000 hectares of forest burned in Ontario. We all remember the orange skies, the unbreathable air and the community evacuations of last summer, which is why it's such a disappointment to see that climate change is ignored in this do-nothing budget.

Do you know what this budget has done to firefighting? Since 2022, \$100 million of funding has been slashed. Quebec is hiring more firefighters. Alberta has declared their wildfire season open in February. Ontario? We cut \$100 million from the firefighting budget.

I have a question for the Premier. Nero played the fiddle while Rome burned around him. What instrument will the Premier choose?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To respond, the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry.

Hon. Graydon Smith: What astounds me is, we're talking about the budget in this House, and the member opposite can't even accurately read the budget—can't tell the difference between budgeted amounts and actuals.

Here's the story: In 2018, the budget was \$69.8 million; in 2024, it's \$135 million. And that's just to start.

We bring more resources to bear than any government in the history of this province to fight forest fires, continually making investments to improve the situation in this province for communities, for infrastructure, for individuals. And we will continue to do that.

I'll take absolutely no lessons from the member opposite on how to either (a) read a budget or (b) fight forest fires in Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: The insults won't change my mind.

But I'll tell you what I'll give the minister: I will give the minister a chance.

A lack of snow this winter and a dry spring spells disaster for our wildfire season. Ontario has historically hired 800 firefighters; this year, we're projected to hire 440—that's half of our firefighting teams.

The government is fully aware of this crisis. They commissioned a \$100,000 third-party audit on firefighter retention, and then they didn't publish it. They know what it will take to fix the problem, but they want to hide it because they're not doing what needs to be done.

Will the Premier commit to publishing the final report of that audit?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I'm sure the member is absolutely thrilled to know and to hear again that we have invested in our fire rangers here in Ontario with a \$5,000 recruitment and retention bonus for both staff to come and staff who are already with us. In fact, all throughout AFFES, we are making sure that people are recognized in 2024 for the incredible work that they do.

We've also made other investments—\$20.5 million—to improve how we fight wildland forest fires, investing in new aerial fire suppression technologies; investing in science and risk assessment, including into collaborative research with universities; building capacity to support Indigenous wildland fire management.

Mr. Speaker, the Liberals can ignore what we've done all they want, but I'll tell you, we are right up on top of it for the people of Ontario, and that's what counts.

TAXATION

Mr. John Yakabuski: My question is for the Associate Minister of Transportation.

The carbon tax is punishing the hard-working people of Ontario. Residents in my riding of Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke tell me every day that this regressive tax is adding further strain to their household budgets. It's raising the price of everything, from groceries and services to the cost of fuel. And with next week's 23% hike, drivers across the province will be paying even more at the pumps.

The dire effects of the carbon tax are felt by our trucking industry, which serves a critical role in transporting the goods that we need in our daily lives.

Can the minister explain the impact of the federal carbon tax on Ontario's trucking industry?

Hon. Vijay Thanigasalam: Thank you to the member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke for that question.

Mr. Speaker, truck drivers are the backbone in keeping our economy moving. My uncle is a truck driver. I know truck drivers navigate the long, quiet roads throughout the night to deliver the goods that we often take for granted each morning.

It is very clear that by increasing the carbon tax, the federal Liberal government does not support the hard-working truck drivers. The carbon tax increases the cost of diesel. Every kilometre costs truck drivers more not just in fuel, but the precious moments they spend away from their families cost more than ever.

Truck drivers are not asking for a free ride, but asking for a fair one—a road where their commitment to our economy is not answered with a penalty.

Under the leadership of Premier Ford, this government and this transportation minister have always stood with truck drivers, and together, we will fight the carbon tax.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you to the minister for his response.

It is clear that the federal carbon tax is affecting the everyday lives of truckers across Ontario.

Up until this point, the federal government has increased the carbon tax on fuel not once, not twice, but five times. To make matters even worse, they plan on increasing it another seven times by 2030.

The opposition NDP and independent Liberals continue to ignore the harmful effects the carbon tax is having on our industries. Rather than standing up for their constituents, they're choosing to support the federal government's

unjust tax. Our government will continue to advocate for Ontarians and call for the elimination of this tax once and for all.

Can the minister please further explain the lasting impact that this punitive tax will have on Ontario's truckers?

Hon. Vijay Thanigasalam: The member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke is right; the number one issue people are facing is an affordability crisis. The cost of living is rising.

The federal Liberals, supported by the Ontario Liberals and NDP, fail to understand that the increase in the carbon tax has a significant impact on the budget of every household in Ontario. The carbon tax is in fact an unwanted guest at the table of every single hard-working Canadian.

Imagine a single mother juggling multiple jobs, struggling to pay for groceries because the carbon tax increases her expenses. Think about a small business owner trying to keep their doors open, or a truck driver who's trying to get their goods moved across our province, or a farmer who is trying to feed our nation.

We must push back against this tax hike on April 1—which is increasing 23%.

Our government, under the leadership of Premier Ford, will always fight for the hard-working—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. The next question.

ARTS AND CULTURAL FUNDING

MPP Jill Andrew: To the Premier: Over 400 Art Gallery of Ontario workers are on strike, and many of these cultural workers are artists themselves. They're here today. These are the people who welcome us into the AGO. They set up and they dismount art installations. They hang the art. They provide educational enrichment through tours. They helped raise funds for the AGO's new building. They clean the gallery. But they are struggling to pay rent and buy food. Because of their hard work, the AGO has become a world-class destination, and yet this government hasn't increased the AGO's budget in over 10 years.

My question is to the Premier: Will this Conservative government properly fund arts institutions so their deficits aren't being balanced on the backs of the least-paid workers? Will the Premier show them the "Monet"?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport.

Hon. Neil Lumsden: With respect to what the AGO is going through right now regarding negotiations and into agreements, we will leave that up to the leadership of the AGO. I'm hopeful, as many are, that the AGO and OPSEU will reach a negotiated agreement very soon.

With respect to the work and the impact they make in this community and our province, and frankly, across the country, it's at a level that most people don't understand. Their impact on tourism, the opportunities that they create and the great job that they do, not only within and outside

the AGO, is outstanding. We thank them for their work. That's why I remain optimistic that a deal will be agreed to relatively soon.

1120

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question.

MPP Jill Andrew: Back to the Premier: Over 60% of AGO workers are precarious part-time workers, and they're kept that way—they are contract. They can't make enough hours to meet the full-time threshold, because, they told me yesterday, the AGO puts up roadblocks. All this, while the AGO contracts out, while AGO execs have recently received salary bonuses of up to 59.6%. While there's "no more money for wages," we've got the AGO CEO making over \$400,000 a year, with bonuses of \$250,000 annually.

My question is back to the Premier: Does this government think this is fair? How are they prepared to work with the AGO and get the employer to the table to have these workers get what they deserve: fair wages, full-time opportunities, protection against contracting out and livable hours of work?

Hon. Neil Lumsden: I won't repeat what I just said, because of the importance of the AGO and the workers there that we see when we go over every day and the great work that they do.

I did mention at the outset, on the previous question, that they are in the midst of negotiations. I believe they've been to the table. I'm not sure if this means—I'm not sure what's going on, but I will leave it in the hands of the experts and those who run the AGO and OPSEU to come to an agreement that will help the workers and those people get back to where they want to be.

The AGO is an important part of what we do in our community. It drives tourism, in spite of what is often talked about in this Legislature, which makes me really quite sad at times—when we don't look at tourism as a driving force of this economy.

I'm confident that a deal will be reached, and I'm positive it will be good for both the AGO and the workers.

TAXATION

Mr. Vincent Ke: My question is to the Minister of Finance. I hear from my constituents who feel stressed and frustrated with the rising cost of living in my riding of Don Valley North, which is echoed throughout Ontario. From families with children to young individuals to seniors, people in Ontario are feeling the pinch at home, at grocery stores and gas stations. With the looming further carbon tax hike, these expenses are only expected to soar. With so many people struggling to make ends meet, they are undoubtedly looking for relief.

Can the minister please tell this House what this government is doing to protect the people of Ontario and to combat the rising cost of living?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Finance, the member for Oakville.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Thank you to the member opposite. I really appreciate that question, because you did bring up some points about the rising cost of living in Ontario.

Ontario is not an island and immune to the global inflation and rising costs we're seeing around the world.

But the government of Ontario is taking action. We're taking action right now in this budget. The Ontario government is currently lowering the cost of gas, cutting the gas tax and extending it until December 2024. This is something that I heard the Minister of Energy just say that Bonnie Crombie and the Liberals and the carbon tax queen would not be doing. In fact, on April 1, it is not only April Fool's Day; it's the day the carbon tax is going to go up, penalizing truckers, workers and commuters across Ontario.

We're taking action to make life more affordable for residents across the province and your riding.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question.

Mr. Vincent Ke: Thank you to the parliamentary assistant for his response.

My follow-up question is also to the Minister of Finance.

Speaker, Ontarians are experiencing economic challenges due to the current high cost of living, and yet the federal government is adding more burdens that will cost an average Ontario family \$1,674 in taxes, starting next Monday.

The 2024 budget has been presented already, on Tuesday. Can the minister further elaborate to highlight how this government is helping Ontarians weather these difficult times as it continues to work to bring about more economic stability, optimism and prosperity?

Mr. Stephen Crawford: I'm glad there are at least one or two independents over there who are against the carbon tax and the rising costs in the province of Ontario. Thank you for your advocacy in working for the people in your ridings.

The carbon tax is the most punitive tax the government of Canada is putting on the people of Ontario. It's hurting everybody in Ontario: truckers, commuters, drivers, families—everything. Groceries are going up.

The government of Ontario is committed to making life more affordable, and we're going to stand, as we've continued to, to fight the federal carbon tax.

I just hope the other independents might take a lesson from that independent and stand with us against the carbon tax.

TAXATION

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: My question is for the Associate Minister of Small Business.

The federal carbon tax is disproportionately affecting small businesses in our province. It is hindering investment, expansion and job creation.

To make matters worse, entrepreneurs in my riding of Markham–Thornhill tell me the federal government's

promised rebates are simply not offsetting increasing costs.

Mr. Speaker, unlike the opposition, our government has always known that the carbon tax only serves to punish hard-working entrepreneurs. That is why we have spoken out against this harmful tax from day one.

I know the associate minister has been busy meeting with small business owners across the province and listening to their concerns.

Could the associate minister tell us what the response has been to the carbon tax?

Hon. Nina Tangri: Thank you to the member for Markham–Thornhill for raising such an important question and his hard work for his constituents.

Speaker, I've heard a resounding response regarding the impact of the carbon tax. Business owners have expressed their frustrations with the increased costs associated with the tax, emphasizing how it affects their day-to-day operations and overall competitiveness. They're saying it's unfair that they pay the most and they get the least. In fact, they're still waiting on the dedicated 10% of carbon tax revenues that small businesses and Indigenous groups were promised.

Speaker, the Liberals across the floor would like Ontario businesses to believe that they're better off without the \$1.3 billion that they're owed. The Liberals and the NDP need a reality check. But unlike them, we won't stop calling on Ottawa to do what's right for our small businesses: Pay them back—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. Supplementary question?

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you to the associate minister for that great response. Our government will always support the small businesses in Ontario that contribute significantly to our economy.

Speaker, general contractors, tradespeople, suppliers and site prep companies all have a critical role in building our province. Sadly, the carbon tax has been a nightmare for their industry. It is driving up the cost on the material and the fuel they need to create more housing. This is ridiculous. The federal government must cut the carbon tax so that small businesses can continue to do their important work and build Ontario.

Can the associate minister tell the House what impact the carbon tax has on small businesses in the construction industry?

Hon. Nina Tangri: Thank you again to the very hard-working member from Markham–Thornhill.

I also hear the serious concerns expressed by small businesses in the construction industry regarding the impacts of the carbon tax. The business owners who are in charge of building homes in this province and getting shovels in the ground while creating job opportunities say that thanks to the federal carbon tax, they're paying more for the gas they need to get to the site and to move their materials.

1130

Small businesses like Groupa Construction in Durham are saying, "This heavy tax will be on the backs of hard-

working Canadians and our clients in residential and civil sectors.” That extra cost could mean a business must lay someone off to balance their books, or charge more to build homes, further driving up prices.

Speaker, the carbon tax is detrimental to every business in every sector. We will stand up for all Ontarians. Scrap the tax now.

AGGREGATE EXTRACTION

Ms. Sandy Shaw: This government has broken a promise to the people of Milton to stop a gravel pit.

Speaker, we know that 70% of people in southern Ontario live near gravel pits. These pits can cause groundwater contamination, air pollution issues and impacts on endangered species. These gravel pits need proper oversight.

But the Auditor General reported that the province does not properly inspect gravel mining pits, and inspection rates have decreased by 64% under this government’s watch. We need urgent action to hire gravel pit inspectors, but this was nowhere in the budget.

We have people here in the gallery from Milton. Premier, they want to know, why did you break your promise?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: The member is referring to a project that has been inactive since 2008.

I will echo the sentiments of the Premier and the government, which is that protecting human health and environment is our top priority.

We heard concerns from the community about the Reid Road reservoir quarry, particularly when it comes to groundwater protection and the need for additional consultation, assessment and oversight for the project. That is why we have required the Reid Road reservoir quarry to be subject to a project-specific environmental assessment process under the Environmental Assessment Act. The regulation provides an additional opportunity for potential impacts to the environment to be assessed, including local groundwater, to make sure we have further consultations to ensure concerns are addressed. The proponent has commenced its project-specific environmental assessment.

Speaker, there’s more to say, and I will continue in my supplemental.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: This government is famous for streamlining environmental assessments, so let’s hope that you actually do a proper environmental assessment, because the Premier and his ex-MPP from Milton, Parm Gill, promised that they would stop the quarry. In fact, the Premier told the people of Milton, “I am not in favour of” the Campbellville quarry.

According to the Auditor General’s report, the ministry has already approved extraction of 13 times more aggregate than is actually removed each year. Therefore,

according to the AG, no more pits or quarries are needed. People are rightfully concerned.

Is the Premier going to keep his promise to stop, once and for all, the proposed Campbellville quarry in Milton? Yes or no?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I will continue with my answer.

The member may be aware that the proponent has commenced this project-specific environmental assessment process and has begun consulting with government agencies, Indigenous communities and the public in preparation for this environmental assessment.

I encourage the public to participate in the ongoing environmental assessment process and to share their concerns directly with the proponent. Once the assessment is complete and submitted, the minister and the ministry will undertake a review, and there will be opportunities for the public to submit comments to the ministry prior to a final decision being made. But a final decision has not been made.

TAXATION

Mr. Will Bouma: My question is for the Solicitor General. Since the implementation of this disastrous carbon tax, Ontarians are paying more for everything, from their grocery bills to fuel costs. With another hike being imposed next week, people in my riding of Brantford–Brant are concerned about the impact of this regressive tax on public safety.

Speaker, firefighters play a critical role in safeguarding our communities. There are few more noble jobs and few more selfless people than those who put their lives on the line to keep us safe.

That’s why I am so proud to serve as a volunteer firefighter at Station 7 St. George in the county of Brant.

And to my colleagues, thank you for always having my back.

We know that increased costs of fuel and procurement directly affect the essential services that ensure our safety and well-being.

The federal Liberals need to scrap this tax today.

Could the Solicitor General please explain to the House the effect the carbon tax is having on firefighting in the province of Ontario?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I want to congratulate the member for being a volunteer firefighter, and everyone who stands up to be a volunteer firefighter in the province of Ontario.

The member is right; every time you fuel up a fire truck—300 litres is an average fire truck, and an aerial truck is even more; a pumper, they’re more. They know when they go to the gas pumps, \$60 or more for each fill-up is just for the carbon tax. When you add it up, it’s over \$8,000 a year just for the carbon tax portion of fuelling that truck. And it’s not fair—it’s not fair anywhere in Ontario. There’s no confusion with our government, but the independent Liberals, in their alternate reality show, think it’s great—and it’s not.

It's not too late. Pick up the phone, call Justin Trudeau and his cabinet and say, "This is affecting our firefighters. Cancel that tax."

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mr. Will Bouma: Thank you to the Solicitor General for his response. It's good to hear that our government holds public safety as its highest priority and is standing up to the unfair carbon tax.

Unlike the opposition NDP and the independent Liberals, our government recognizes that this tax is punishing hard-working Ontarians.

Speaker, people in my riding are worried about how the carbon tax is placing a strain on our public safety system. All Ontarians deserve to live safely in their communities, and they are counting on our front-line first responders to ensure their security and well-being. Even if the NDP and the Liberals won't, we must always stand with our public safety heroes.

Can the Solicitor General further elaborate on the importance of cancelling the carbon tax for the firefighters of the province of Ontario?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Just the other day, we had the head of the Ontario Association of Fire Chiefs right here, we had the president of the Ontario Professional Fire Fighters Association right here, and they know our government will always stand with our firefighters morning, noon and night. But whether you're fighting fires—and all we ask for them is that they come home safe at the end of the day, or for those police officers to come home safe at the end of the day, as well.

The carbon tax on every vehicle that is used for public safety is an added cost that could be used to buy more bunker gear, buy more technology to fight auto theft—do something that we can have a tangible, lasting benefit. The carbon tax costs us on public safety. It's not fair.

It's not too late. Bonnie Crombie should do the right thing, call her friend Justin Trudeau, because she has the number, and cancel—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. The next question.

HEALTH CARE FUNDING

Miss Monique Taylor: My question is for the Premier.

The Greater Hamilton Health Network laid out a pre-budget submission—a detailed plan endorsed and supported by over 67 stakeholders. Their ask was \$20 million, but the government allocated only \$2.2 million this week, just a tenth of the proposal. The proposal, if fully funded, would see over 55,000 residents in Hamilton and the surrounding areas connected with a family doctor—team-based, patient-centred medical care and support in high schools that are at risk in our communities.

Premier, what is the reason this funding is not in the budget this year?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Deputy Premier and Minister of Health.

Hon. Sylvia Jones: In fact, I think the member opposite should know that we have invested in primary care multidisciplinary teams.

Of course, in February we announced 78 new, expanded satellite opportunities—78, Speaker. Imagine what that does to the people who want to have primary care multidisciplinary teams in their community.

Clearly, our expression of interest that we issued last year was dealt with a lot of excitement—because people want to have that opportunity; communities want to have the opportunity.

That's why I was particularly thankful that, in this week's budget, we have announced another expansion of that primary care multidisciplinary team approach. It means that if you need to see a family doctor, you'll see that family doctor; if you need to see a nurse practitioner, you will see that nurse practitioner; if you need to see a dietitian or a mental health worker, you will have that opportunity. It is exactly what clinicians across Ontario want, and it is exactly what we are providing, as a province, with our new investment of \$356 million.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question.

Miss Monique Taylor: A tenth of the funding is not going to cut it. Our health care teams are stretched to the brink, and our constituents are struggling to find and access the care they need for their health issues.

Ontario health teams like GHHN have the solutions. They do the work. They just need the funding. Their comprehensive proposal would see the equivalent of nearly 170 full-time additional health care providers, from nurses to social workers and more. Their plan would have included administrative support so physicians could spend time with their patients, as the NDP have proposed. Now they are left with just one tenth of their need.

Premier, I ask you again: Is this the funding that communities like Hamilton can count on in this budget?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: Of course, primary care expansion is just one investment that we have made with our budget. I have to say, you also need to train these clinicians.

The expansion that we are seeing in Brampton with the new medical school, in Scarborough with the new medical school, and, of course, Tuesday the announcement that was lauded across Ontario, the York medical school, that will focus on primary care practitioners—those are the investments that are going to make an impact in our communities.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): That concludes our question period for this morning.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll first recognize the government House leader under standing order 59.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I thank all members for a productive week for the people of the province of Ontario.

On Monday, April 8, in the morning, as colleagues know, we will be coming back at 9 o'clock and we will begin with government notice of motion number 77. In the

afternoon, we will go to Bill 180, which is the Building a Better Ontario Act.

In the morning of Tuesday, April 9, we will continue with Bill 180, the Building a Better Ontario Act. In the afternoon, we will continue with Bill 180. In private members' business, it will be Bill 170.

On Wednesday, April 10, in the morning, it's Bill 180, the Building a Better Ontario Act. In the afternoon, it's government motion number 77. Private members' public business will be Bill 173.

On Thursday, April 11, in the morning, we will be debating a bill that will be introduced earlier in the week. In the afternoon, we will move to government motion number 77. And private members' public business will be Bill 172.

VISITORS

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I understand the member for Niagara West has a point of order?

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I just wanted to make sure that I welcomed some distinguished guests who are in the gallery today. From Brock University, we have Dr. Lesley Rigg, Meaghan Rusnell, and Daniel Grubb. And, of course, we have our lovely April Jeffs with us. I want to acknowledge them and welcome them to Queen's Park.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Education, I gather, has a point of order?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: If I may build on the member's introduction, I want to also welcome Dr. Deborah MacLatchy, the president of Wilfrid Laurier, who's here. Thank you for joining us in the people's House.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Mississauga–Malton has a point of order.

Mr. Deepak Anand: I just want to take a moment to introduce Robin, Suzanne and Carrie-Lee, who are doing an incredible job in skilled trades. Welcome to Queen's Park.

DEFERRED VOTES

TAXATION

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Next, we have a deferred vote on private members' notice of motion number 82.

Call in the members. This is a five-minute bell.

The division bells rang from 1144 to 1149.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

Mr. Clark has moved private member's notice of motion number 82.

All those in favour, please rise and remain standing until recognized by the Clerk.

Ayes

Anand, Deepak
Babikian, Aris
Barnes, Patrice

Harris, Mike
Hogarth, Christine
Holland, Kevin

Rakocevic, Tom
Riddell, Brian
Romano, Ross

Bell, Jessica	Jones, Sylvia	Sabawy, Sheref
Bouma, Will	Jones, Trevor	Sandhu, Amarjot
Brady, Bobbi Ann	Jordan, John	Sattler, Peggy
Bresee, Ric	Kanapathi, Logan	Saunderson, Brian
Byers, Rick	Ke, Vincent	Scott, Laurie
Calandra, Paul	Kernaghan, Terence	Shaw, Sandy
Cho, Raymond Sung Joon	Kerzner, Michael S.	Skelly, Donna
Cho, Stan	Khanjin, Andrea	Smith, Dave
Clark, Steve	Kusendova-Bashta, Natalia	Smith, David
Coe, Lorne	Leardi, Anthony	Smith, Graydon
Crawford, Stephen	Lecce, Stephen	Smith, Laura
Cuzzetto, Rudy	Lumsden, Neil	Smith, Todd
Dixon, Jess	Mamakwa, Sol	Stevens, Jennifer (Jennie)
Dowie, Andrew	Mantha, Michael	Tangri, Nina
Downey, Doug	Martin, Robin	Taylor, Monique
Fedeli, Victor	McCarthy, Todd J.	Thanigasalam, Vijay
Fife, Catherine	McGregor, Graham	Thompson, Lisa M.
Flack, Rob	Mulroney, Caroline	Tibollo, Michael A.
Ford, Michael D.	Oosterhoff, Sam	Triantafilopoulos, Effie J.
French, Jennifer K.	Pang, Billy	Vanthof, John
Gallagher Murphy, Dawn	Parsa, Michael	Vaugeois, Lise
Gates, Wayne	Pasma, Chandra	Wai, Daisy
Gélinas, France	Pierre, Natalie	West, Jamie
Gretzky, Lisa	Pirie, George	Williams, Charmaine A.
Grewal, Hardeep Singh	Quinn, Nolan	Yakabuski, John
Hardeman, Ernie	Rae, Matthew	

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): All those opposed, please rise and remain standing until recognized by the Clerk.

Nays

Clancy, Aislinn Jama, Sarah Schreiner, Mike

The Clerk of the Assembly (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 86; the nays are 3.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Motion agreed to.

LEGISLATIVE PAGES

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm now going to ask our legislative pages to assemble.

It is now time to say a word of thanks to this group of legislative pages.

Our pages are smart, trustworthy and hard-working. They're indispensable to the effective functioning of this chamber, and we are indeed fortunate to have had them here.

To our pages: You depart having made many new friends, with a greater understanding of parliamentary democracy and memories that will last a lifetime. Each of you now will go home and no doubt will continue your studies, and contribute to your communities and your province and your country in important ways. We expect great things from all of you. Who knows? Maybe some of you will someday take your seats in this House as members or work here as staff. But no matter where your path leads you, we wish you well.

Please join me in thanking this fine group of legislative pages.

Applause.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): There being no further business, this House stands in recess until 1 p.m.
The House recessed from 1155 to 1300.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

Mr. Rick Byers: It's my great pleasure to recognize a long-term dear friend of mine. We went to high school together in Port Hope. Yes, it was the last millennium. But it's great to have Harry Worsley with us today. He's from Uxbridge, a commercial tree farmer. It's great to see you, Harry. Thanks for coming. Welcome.

Hon. Nina Tangri: I just want to say a big welcome to some of my constituency staff, Kam Sandhu and Saroj Gandhi, and a couple of constituents, Aftab Sehgal and Ranjit Bassi. Welcome to your House.

Mr. Dave Smith: She's actually not here, but I know she's watching on TV because she said that she wanted to see petitions today, so I want to wish a happy birthday to my wife, Lorien Smith.

REPORTS BY COMMITTEES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I beg to inform the House that today the Clerk received the report on intended appointments dated March 28, 2024, of the Standing Committee on Government Agencies. Pursuant to standing order 110(f)(9), the report is deemed to be adopted by the House.

Report deemed adopted.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

CHINESE HERITAGE MONTH ACT, 2024

LOI DE 2024 SUR LE MOIS DU PATRIMOINE CHINOIS

Mr. Ke moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 183, An Act to proclaim the month of February as Chinese Heritage Month / Projet de loi 183, Loi proclamant le mois de février Mois du patrimoine chinois.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Is it the pleasure of the House that the bill be read for the first time? Agreed.

First reading agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Don Valley North.

Mr. Vincent Ke: Today, Ontario is home to more than 820,000 people of Chinese origin. Since 1788, the Chinese community has been making a significant, progressive and enduring impact in Canada by helping to build critical

infrastructure such as the Canadian Pacific Railway and improve the Canadian economy, while adding depth and character to the social fabric of our nation.

February is an important month for the Chinese Canadian community, because the Lunar New Year occurs during this winter season and represents a significant cultural observance and celebratory time. By proclaiming the month of February as Chinese Heritage Month, the province of Ontario publicly acknowledges and affirms its commitment to celebrate and educate future generations about the important role that Chinese Canadians have played and continue to play.

PETITIONS

RENEWABLE ENERGY

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: This petition is titled "Transform Ontario's Energy Sector," and it reads:

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas our planet is undergoing significant warming with adverse consequences for health, for agriculture, for infrastructure and for our children's future;

"Whereas the costs of inaction are severe, such as extreme weather events causing flooding and drought;

"Whereas in 2023 Canadians experienced the most severe wildfire season on record, 2023 was the hottest year on record, and 2024 is anticipated to be even hotter;

"Whereas successive governments over the last two decades have expanded gas plants despite public pushback;

"Whereas reports, such as those from RBC Climate Action Institute, Dunsky Energy and Climate Advisors, and the Sustainability Solutions Group agree that the government must immediately reduce our reliance on fossil fuels;

"Whereas the conclusion of the Ontario Energy Board regarding Enbridge's plan for a multi-billion dollar methane gas grid expansion is 'not responsive to the energy transition and increases the risk of stranded or underutilized assets';

"Whereas Ontario must reduce our province's reliance on fossil fuels and instead invest in new renewable energy projects to ensure we meet our provincial climate targets;

"Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to pause the expansion of methane-fired electricity generation, and begin to wind down their use to just standby 'peaker' plants; expand and accelerate the procurement of electricity from renewable sources, while lifting the moratorium on offshore wind power, negotiating increased power transfers from Quebec and pursuing more conservation, demand management, and distributed energy networks; support the Ontario Energy Board's recent decision recognizing the current energy transition, and its implications for new, small-volume customer methane-gas connections."

I support this decision, will affix my signature to it and give it to page Anne.

AGRI-FOOD INDUSTRY

Mr. Dave Smith: In recognition of the standing order changes that we'll be making: I have an extremely long petition. Multiple copies have been signed by many people asking the Ontario Legislature to support the changes to the ARIO Act and the Veterinarians Act to improve agriculture across Ontario.

I'll sign the petition and give it to page Parker.

SCHOOL SAFETY

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It's my honour to present the following petitions on behalf of a number of different wonderful educators and all-around good people: Steve Desmond, Tracy Morrison, Marcie Zavitz, Laura Cornish, Matthew Warren, Marianne Petovello, Leslie Bondy, Kate Campbell, Jacqui Shields, Jennifer Latella and Carol Lynn Bradley. And it's titled "Keep Classrooms Safe for Students and Staff."

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas students and education workers deserve stronger, safer schools in which to learn and work;

"Whereas the pressure placed on our education system has contributed to an increase in reports of violence in our schools;

"Whereas crowded classrooms, a lack of support for staff, and underfunding of mental health supports are all contributing to this crisis;

"Whereas the government of Ontario has the responsibility and tools to address this crisis, but has refused to act;

"Therefore, we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to:

"Take immediate action to address violence in our schools;

"Invest in more mental health resources;

"End violence against education workers and improve workplace violence reporting."

I fully support this petition, will affix my signature and deliver it with page Bhavna to the Clerks.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Ms. Catherine Fife: This petition's entitled "Mental Health Services in Ontario.

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas there is currently a lack of consistent mental health intake policies and care across Ontario when people seek assistance at hospitals;

"Whereas staff training and readiness to support patients with mental health issues at Ontario's hospitals lacks consistency and is not sufficiently trauma-informed or evidence-based;

"Whereas current discharge procedures often leave vulnerable people without access to adequate care or support;

"Whereas ... 4,500 people" have died "by suicide each year in Canada and suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth and young adults ages 15 to 34; and

"Whereas the experience of Waterloo's Roth family in the death of their daughter Kaitlyn has brought to light serious flaws in mental health discharge procedures;

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We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to direct the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions to earmark funding for dedicated training for staff providing mental health services with a focus on evidence-based, trauma-informed approaches, to review intake and discharge procedures to ensure consistency of care, and to provide funding for alternative destination clinics in communities across Ontario."

It's my pleasure to support this petition in honour of Kaitlyn Roth and sign my signature.

TAXATION

Mr. Dave Smith: I have another petition that I've already read into the record once, certified by the Clerks, that asks the federal government to delay or stop the carbon tax increase on April 1.

I will sign this petition and give it to page Sarah to give to the Clerks.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I have a petition addressed to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario entitled "Pass the Safe Night Out Act." It reads:

"Whereas we are experiencing a sexual violence epidemic, with Statistics Canada reporting in 2021 that sexual assault was at its highest level in 25 years and community support organizations reporting more crisis calls than ever;

"Whereas 65% of women report experiencing unwanted sexual advances while socializing in a bar or restaurant, and incidents of sexual assaults involving drugs and alcohol most often occur immediately after leaving a licensed establishment or event; and

"Whereas there is no legal requirement for the people who hold liquor licences and permits, sell and serve liquor, or provide security at licensed establishments and events to be trained in recognizing and safely intervening in sexual harassment and violence;

"Whereas servers in licensed establishments also face high risk of sexual violence and harassment from co-workers and patrons;

"Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to immediately pass the Ontario NDP's Safe Night Out Act to make Ontario's bars and nightclubs safer for patrons and staff by requiring training in sexual violence and harassment prevention, by strengthening protections for servers from workplace sexual violence, and by requiring every establishment to develop and post a policy on how sexual violence and harassment

will be handled, including accessing local resources and supports.”

I fully support this petition, affix my signature and send it to the table with page Emily.

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Mr. Dave Smith: This petition is entitled “Encourage passage of Bill 121, the Improving Dementia Care in Ontario Act, 2023.”

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Alzheimer’s disease affects over 250,000 people in the province of Ontario;

“Whereas it is estimated that approximately 400,000 individuals will be diagnosed with dementia by 2030;

“Whereas by the year 2050, more than 1.7 million Canadians are expected to be living with dementia, with an average of 685 individuals diagnosed each day;

“Whereas Alzheimer’s disease is not a normal part of aging and is irreversible;

“Whereas 69% of LTC residents are living with dementia...;

“Whereas strategies to mitigate stigma and combat ageism should be at the heart of the strategy;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“To urge all members of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to build on the progress this government has made on building a patient-centred home and community care system.”

I fully endorse this petition, will sign it and give it to page Olivia.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: This petition is titled “To Raise Social Assistance Rates.” It’s signed by residents from Port Dover, Cambridge, Sault Ste. Marie, Mount Hope, Dundas, Belleville, Pickering, Mississauga, Hamilton-Stoney Creek. It reads:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Ontario’s social assistance rates are well below Canada’s official Market Basket Measure poverty line and far from adequate to cover the rising costs of food and rent: \$733 for individuals on OW and \$1,308 for ODSP;

“Whereas an open letter to the Premier and two cabinet ministers, signed by over 230 organizations, recommends that social assistance rates be doubled for both” OW and ODSP;

“Whereas small increases to ODSP have still left these citizens below the poverty line. Both they and those receiving the frozen OW rates are struggling to survive at this time of alarming inflation;

“Whereas the government of Canada recognized in its CERB program that a ‘basic income’ of \$2,000 per month was the standard support required by individuals who lost their employment during the pandemic;

“We, the undersigned citizens of Ontario, petition the Legislative Assembly to double social assistance rates for OW and ODSP.”

I could not agree more. I will affix my signature and give it to page Anne once again. And I want to thank Dr. Sally Palmer for sending these petitions.

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Mr. Dave Smith: I have another petition about encouraging passage of Bill 121. I think this is a very valuable petition based on dementia in Ontario.

I’m happy to sign it on behalf of the residents of Peterborough–Kawartha and give it to page Noah to take to the table.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It’s my honour to read the following petition into the record. It’s entitled “Health Care: Not for Sale.” It reads:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Ontarians should get health care based on need—not the size of your wallet;

“Whereas Premier Ford and Health Minister Jones say they’re planning to privatize parts of health care;

“Whereas privatization will bleed nurses, doctors and PSWs out of our public hospitals, making the health care crisis worse;

“Whereas privatization always ends with patients getting a bill;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to immediately stop all plans to privatize Ontario’s health care system, and fix the crisis in health care by:

“—repealing Bill 124 and recruiting, retaining, and respecting doctors, nurses and PSWs with better working conditions;

“—licensing tens of thousands of internationally educated nurses and other health care professionals already in Ontario, who wait years and pay thousands to have their credentials certified;

“—10 employer-paid sick days;

“—making education and training free or low-cost for nurses, doctors, and other health care professionals;

“—incentivizing doctors and nurses to choose to live and work in northern Ontario;

“—funding hospitals to have enough nurses on every shift, on every ward.”

I fully support this petition, will affix my signature and deliver it to the Clerks.

SEXUAL ABUSE

Mr. Dave Smith: I have a petition in support of member Nolan Quinn from Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry’s private member’s bill to encourage school boards to provide more education with respect to child sexual abuse and prevention.

I fully endorse this petition, will sign my name and give it to page Tyler.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I would like to thank Dr. Sally Palmer from McMaster University for collecting signatures on petitions to raise social assistance rates. The petition reads:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Ontario’s social assistance rates are well below Canada’s official Market Basket Measure poverty line and far from adequate to cover the rising costs of food and rent...;

“Whereas an open letter to the Premier and two cabinet ministers, signed by over 230 organizations, recommends that social assistance rates be doubled for both Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP);

“Whereas the recent small budget increase of 5% for ODSP still leaves these citizens well below the poverty line, both they and those receiving the frozen OW rates are struggling to live in this time of alarming inflation;

“Whereas the government of Canada recognized in its CERB program that a ‘basic income’ of \$2,000 per month was the standard support required by individuals who lost their employment during the pandemic;”

Therefore “we, the undersigned citizens of Ontario, petition the Legislative Assembly to double social assistance rates for OW and ODSP.”

I fully support this petition, affix my signature and send it to the table with page Olivia.

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I hosted a health care townhall yesterday—and lots of signatures for this petition titled “Health Care: Not for Sale.” It reads:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Ontarians should get health care based on need—not the size of your wallet;

“Whereas Premier ... Ford and Health Minister Jones say they’re planning to privatize parts of health care;

“Whereas privatization will bleed nurses, doctors and PSWs out of our public hospitals, making the health care crisis worse;

“Whereas privatization always ends with patients getting a bill;

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“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to immediately stop all plans to further privatize Ontario’s health care system, and fix the crisis in health care by:”

—fixing the damage caused by Bill 124;

—licensing tens of thousands of internationally educated nurses and other health care professionals already in Ontario, who wait years and pay thousands to have their credentials certified;

—legislating 10 employer-paid sick days;

“—making education and training free or low-cost for nurses, doctors and other health care professionals,” particularly in rural and northern Ontario;

“—incentivizing” them “to choose to live and work in” these parts;

“—funding hospitals to have enough nurses on every shift, on every ward.”

I support this petition, will affix my signature and give it to page Bhavna.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

2024 ONTARIO BUDGET

Resuming the debate adjourned on March 28, 2024, on the motion that this House approves in general the budgetary policy of the government.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I believe we left off with the member for Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound.

Mr. Rick Byers: It’s a great pleasure to continue discussion of this budget motion and the government’s budget policies. And I was talking about the infrastructure investment that government is making over 10 years and I just want to emphasize how important it is having that long-term horizon—it’s not next year; it’s not up to the next election—it’s a 10-year program where the government is proposing to spend \$190 billion, which is a record number in so many different sectors.

I was talking about transit and I mentioned the GO Transit investments, which are very substantial both in terms of infrastructure and service levels. I want to talk now about subways. The overall transit window over 10 years is \$67.5 billion—a record. And subways are such an important part of the fabric of the city, particularly here in the GTA and particularly here in Toronto directly. There has always been a reluctance to invest in subways and get them done. That’s why, really, the city of Toronto did nothing for 30 and 40 years. That’s why so much of our transit system is above ground, with buses and streetcars, versus other big cities where they never stopped digging. Happily, our government uploaded the subway projects because I sat on the board of the TTC for three years and I saw first-hand how time after time after time—for example, the Scarborough subway was rejected. There’s always a reason not to put shovels in the ground because it’s not easy for neighbourhoods. We’ve seen what’s happening with the Eglinton Crosstown; it’s been very, very challenging.

Well, I’ll tell you what, folks: When that line opens, people then will say, “Okay, it was painful, but this is the benefit we get.” The same thing for Scarborough and what’s happening now with the three-stop subway there. I believe it’s called Diggy Scardust—if I’m not mistaken—digging actively. But whether it’s there or the Ontario Line, the north York expansion, the three-stop Scarborough subway, these are all being built.

The other thing I'd say is that there's been an adjustment to the way these projects are done because what's called the public-private partnership model, the P3 model, is seen to be not working as well in transit as it could. And so, to their great credit, Metrolinx has adjusted that model and that's why all these projects are running ahead of time and no doubt they will be delivered on time and on budget. So I'm very much looking forward to that huge investment in transit in our community.

Because, by the way, let's not forget: The members opposite talk frequently about the environment. You know what? Transit is a phenomenal investment for the environment. It gets people out of cars, off the roads, into efficient transit and it's great for doing that, so that's a great policy that our government is following.

I want to now just mention health care on the infrastructure side: Over 10 years, \$48.5 billion of health care facilities—phenomenal number, and it's so important. I won't talk about the state of things when we came into government, but I'll tell you what we're doing: We're fixing it, not just for tomorrow, but for the generations to come. And it's \$50 billion over 10 years, including close to \$36 billion in hospital capital grants to support more than 50 hospital projects all around the province that would add approximately 3,000 new beds over 10 years. Just the magnitude of those numbers is just fantastic. Again, it's not for tomorrow; that's for the next generation, including:

- the Weeneebayko Area Health Authority of Moosonee, way up north. Comments were made about northern health care. We're investing there;

- a new 17-storey tower at Queen Street and Victoria Street for the University Health Network St. Michael's Hospital, to accommodate expanded emergency department and ambulatory services;

- redevelopment of the Ottawa Hospital Civic Campus to become one of the most advanced trauma centres in eastern Ontario;

- support for the Windsor-Essex regional hospital, so important in that part of the province; and

- projects all over: Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre, as well, partners with the University Health Network. So it goes on and on, which is such great news for these communities.

Long-term care, as well: We've spent \$6.4 billion since 2019. The goal is to build 58,000 new and upgraded long-term beds in the province by 2028, such an important investment. You know, when I went to high school—I'll be there in one of those beds in the not-too-distant future, perhaps. Anyway, hopefully, it will ease the way. But it's so important for our seniors who built this great province and country of ours to have the kind of facilities that they need and deserve.

I will say here again, talking about the legacy of previous governments, that over 15 years, the previous government built 611 beds, I believe the number was, in Ontario. In my own riding of Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound—the great previous member, Bill Walker—in four years, there were about 950 beds, versus 611 in the whole

province over 15 years. That just shows you the perspective that they had versus what we're having, and we're going to keep going and building, building and building until there's enough beds for our folks.

Schools, as well: \$23 billion, including \$16 billion in capital grants over the next 10 years to build more schools all over the province—French and English public schools in Blind River; a new English school in Ottawa; St. Anne's Catholic School in St. Thomas; and in Vaughan, a French Catholic school. In my own community in the great, thriving metropolis of Markdale, the Beavercrest school is being built. These institutions matter so much to our local communities, and that's why our government is going to keep building. So it's not just for tomorrow; it's for our kids and their kids in the future.

All that to say, Madam Speaker, it's just a great pleasure to stand up and support this motion and all the things that we are doing. Whether it's in infrastructure, in program spending, in making life more affordable, we are there for Ontarians, and we're going to keep going and make sure we get it done.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): It is now time for questions and responses. I recognize the member for St. Catharines.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: I thank the member across the way from Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound. My question, through you, Speaker: How does the government justify the lack of specific measures in the budget to support Niagara's critical sectors like child care? Within this budget, it does not even mention the word "child care."

Parents in St. Catharines know the government is underspending on their commitments, forcing families to sit endlessly on wait-lists for spots. Will this government explain why they refuse to provide a funding plan for providers that was due three months ago, and why they ignore this important affordable issue for families with little people?

Mr. Rick Byers: I thank the member for the question. Obviously, child care is a big theme of what we're doing, and we entered into a historic agreement with the federal government to bring \$10-a-day child care to our province. That is moving along and working very well.

As of December 2023, Ontario had approximately 513,000 spaces in licensed child care centres for children zero to 12 years old, and as of December, there were more than 309,000 spaces for children zero to five enrolled in CWELCC, representing 92% of all spaces in this child care group. We've got early childhood learning all over. We've signed the \$13.2-billion program. We will keep investing in child care, work with the community and make sure that those spaces are available for our kids and their kids.

1330

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Questions?

Mr. John Jordan: I want to thank the member from Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound. I always appreciate his financial knowledge when he speaks to these matters.

My question is regarding something that's very important to my riding, and that is the Housing-Enabling Water Systems Fund and really the investments in infrastructure and how this will help this government meet its housing targets.

Mr. Rick Byers: Thank you to the great member for his great question.

He's touched on something that is so important to building housing: It's the infrastructure that needs to be there at the beginning.

We heard loud and clear from your community and communities all over the province about needing housing-enabling infrastructure—water and waste water, essentially. There is new funding of \$1.8 billion directed towards that area. This will enable municipalities to apply for this funding and get that infrastructure in place so the houses can be built.

But it's not just that. There's working with the Ontario infrastructure fund. There is other funding and opportunities that we're doing. Re-profiling the Infrastructure Ontario lending program is being done as well. So there are more and more areas where municipalities can get that infrastructure built so that we can get the houses built that we need here in Ontario.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: We already know that, in the university and college sector, at least 50% of the instructors are low-waged, precarious contract workers, even though many of them come with PhDs—so already a clear indication of how under-budgeted universities are. Yet I see in the budget documents that the government is spending \$15 million to private, for-profit companies with no expertise or ties to post-secondary education tasked with finding efficiencies.

To me, this sounds like harassment and an incredible waste of money that should be spent on core funding for universities. Can you explain to me why that \$15 million is being spent on outside investigators?

Mr. Rick Byers: I thank the member for the question about post-secondary institutions and what we're doing.

I point to the information in the budget on page 8—one of my favourite pages—talking about the spending programs. Post-secondary is going from \$11.7 billion two years ago to \$12.6 billion this year and into the twelves and thirteens in 2026-27, so big investments there. On the capital side: \$5.7 billion over 10 years for colleges; \$1.3 billion for universities.

We recognize the challenges facing post-secondary education, which is why the blue-ribbon panel was established. We're taking action to stabilize the province's colleges and universities by introducing a suite of measures, including an investment of nearly \$1.3 billion in new funding to ensure the continued sustainability of the post-secondary education system. Whether it's \$903 million over three years for the new Postsecondary Education Sustainability Fund, including \$203 million in funding the top-ups for institutions—and on and on and on.

So we recognize the importance of this sector. We will keep treating it as a priority, and look forward to working with the members opposite to support that goal.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you to the member from Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound for highlighting all the provisions from this budget.

I want to see what we have in the budget for our seniors. Seniors are the backbone of our province. They have done so much work in raising their families and contributing to Ontario. What are we doing for our seniors in this budget?

Mr. Rick Byers: I thank the member very much for your question. You're absolutely right: Seniors are such an important part of our community. They built our province. We've got a whole range of programs. I mentioned the long-term-care investments and the health care investments because they'll impact directly on seniors in the community. We will continue with those. Those are so important for all elements of our population, but seniors in particular.

The other element that is very important here is our Guaranteed Annual Income System program, the GAINS program, directed at seniors. That's being enhanced and is a very, very fundamental part now of the tax system to assist those who need it most and were there for us. Starting in July, the benefit will increase to \$87 a month for eligible seniors and \$174 per month for couples. On and on and on, we're going to keep investing in seniors.

I thank the member for the question.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thanks to my friend from Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound. We serve on the committee, and we agree to disagree on many things, unfortunately.

You mentioned infrastructure spending in your comments. We're unpacking some of the infrastructure spending that is in this budget. One of the items is really questionable. It's the production of a new media studio over in Whitney Block—in the bunker, I call it, in the basement. It's where the budget announcement happened yesterday. It was a cost of \$300,000. Nobody called for it. There's no rationale to have a separate media studio where reporters can only ask one follow-up question.

How was this decision made? Who made this decision? We have a media studio here in the building. We have the cabinet room. There was no reason for a second media studio which actually limits journalists asking the government questions.

Mr. Rick Byers: I thank the member for the question. Yes, it has been a pleasure to serve on the finance committee with the member. We were travelling all over Ontario. As well, I worked with the member on the Financial Accountability Officer selection, so we agree on some things.

When you invest in infrastructure, there are all sorts of projects all over that require attention—some of them big, some of them small. Look at this building here. It has been around since this province started, and we all feel that at

times. Whether it's the heating system or the cooling system, they all need work, and the media studio as well. I don't know the intimate details of what was behind that project; perhaps it was to give the opposition more opportunities to be in front of the media over time. We're always thinking of the opposition, Madam Speaker, to ensure that they have opportunities as well as we have.

Anyway, it's an important part of our Queen's Park infrastructure, and we'll keep working on all that as we can.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): It's now time for further debate.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: It's always an honour to be able to rise and advocate for the people of Kiiwetinoong. I know that Kiiwetinoong is a very unique riding. We have 31 First Nations. We have 24 fly-in First Nations that do not have access to provincial highways, provincial roads. But also, one of the things that we have—we are so rich in northwestern Ontario. We are rich in the resources that we have. We are rich in the rivers, the creeks, the lakes, the animals, the fish that live in those places, all the trees that we have. We are so rich. Not only that; we are so rich in our ways of life, in the teachings, the stories that we have as First Nations people.

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I've been here about 5.5 years, close to six years. I sit here, and I'll listen to the budget, I'll listen to the fall economic statement, and if you're in Kiiwetinoong, if you're on-reserve in Fort Severn, if you're in Big Trout Lake, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, this budget isn't for you. If you're a child that's 12 years old and you're thinking of dying by suicide, this budget is not for you. If you're in Neskantaga and you have a boil-water advisory that's going on 30 years, this budget is not for you. If you're in a home with three families that have to rotate their sleeping schedule, this budget is not for you.

Those are the realities of Kiiwetinoong. I think sometimes the disappointment that the budgets give me becomes normal. Status quo is construed as normal and acceptable, with conditions that we see and the life-on-reserve that would not be construed as normal or acceptable anywhere else in Ontario, anywhere else in Canada. That's the reality.

What I mean by that is, when we talk about the realities of Kiiwetinoong, they're not addressed in the 2024 Ontario budget. In Sioux Lookout, which is a town of 5,000 to 6,000 people but services 30 surrounding First Nations, we have 21 long-term-care beds for the 30,000 people that live in the area. In order to get a bed—there's a waiting period of four and a half years to be able to get to a long-term-care bed.

So those are the realities that we see, and on Tuesday, I was able to see the budget, full of re-announcements, half measures, gaps. I could not help but just to sit here and shake my head in disappointment. But also I wish I could say that I was surprised. Again, this is not the first budget that has failed First Nations, failed communities in the riding of Kiiwetinoong.

I believe that there are not enough announcements that would address the issues people in northern Ontario and

First Nations communities are facing. I know that this budget is not for the people looking for a family doctor or the people struggling with the cost of living. It's not for the people of Kiiwetinoong.

Every now and then, the food prices—sometimes people will send me food prices in the riding of Kiiwetinoong. I think it was earlier, maybe Monday morning, somebody sent me a picture of a small fruit salad. It was, like, 30-something dollars. It was just horrendous, but that's the way the system is. Some people's answer is, "Okay, that's why we need to build roads," but that's not the answer. That's years down the road. That's decades down the road. We need to be able have quality of life dealt with right away.

The things I've talked about for the last five and a half years—it is our status quo, a status quo where First Nations in the north have these boil-water advisories, where too many people, too many youth—11, 12 years old, losing hope—are attempting suicide due to intergenerational trauma.

I was in one of the First Nations not too long ago, a few months ago, and this one community had 24 11- and 12-year-old boys and girls who had a suicide pact. About a month and a half ago, one of those boys and girls fell through the cracks. That's what we're dealing with up north. When we see mental health being mentioned in big numbers but that it's not filtered down to the actual people that need it, it's wrong. I think, for a while there, when we talk about intergenerational trauma—you cannot just deal with them downstream.

Again, climate change is a real factor, as well, for the winter roads. The corridors that we have in my riding—there's four corridors—and the First Nations rely on those corridors for winter roads.

I guess what I'm saying, again, Speaker, is these realities would not be acceptable for one day here in Toronto or anywhere else in the province.

When I look at the investments in this budget, the numbers just don't add up. There are investments to connect 600,000 people to primary care, but today there are 2.3 million people without primary care. If I did my calculations, and if they were correct, that leaves 1.7 million people out—1.7 million people who will continue not to have primary care.

In northern Ontario, specifically in Kiiwetinoong and northwestern Ontario, the crisis in primary care is more extreme. I always talk about unnecessary suffering. I always talk about needless debts. When you have these small communities that are not able to get locum doctors for their hospitals, for their emergency rooms, for their surgeons, a few primary physicians fill in to keep these services running. Can you imagine the pressure and the burnout the physicians in the north experience? When I talk about health, when I talk about the struggles, it means that it's difficult to retain physicians and the surgeons in the north. When we talk about the lack of surgeons, the hospital in Sioux Lookout can no longer offer seamless surgical coverage. This budget is not including to address this crisis.

There is a ripple effect to these shortages and service interruptions. More of the patients in Kiiwetinoong will have to be sent further away from their homes. Not only that, they have to be away longer from their families.

1350

While we saw an increase in Ontario's Northern Health Travel Grant, the budget for accommodations goes down every day after the first night. My colleague the MPP from Nickel Belt pointed out that when people come to Toronto for serious illnesses, the grant doesn't come close to covering the cost, and some people give up. But even though the grant for accommodations increased a bit, the reimbursements for kilometres travelled did not increase.

We had so many questions in this budget that were just not answered, such as the role of private companies in health care, and paid sick days. Instead, if you compare the budget to 2023 interim actuals, and when you look at inflation, we are seeing less investment in health care.

I know that when I was at this meeting last month, on February 8, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Chiefs Winter Assembly, the leaders declared a state of emergency. It was not only because of what I just discussed with the state of our health care and emergency health services but also because of the tragic and preventable deaths in our communities with the sudden death of our children, the child suicide pacts, the overall mental health crisis, the overall addictions crisis.

I hope that everyone in this House is aware of the responsibilities the government has to address the mental health effects of intergenerational trauma stemming from Indian residential schools and the Sixties Scoop and, furthermore, the intergenerational trauma of Ralph Rowe, who used to be an OPP officer, who was a Boy Scout leader and an Anglican minister. He had his own plane. Ralph Rowe was one of the most prolific pedophiles who lived in our region for 20 years. We know that he abused 500-plus boys in the 1970s and the 1980s in the riding of Kiiwetinoong.

I've seen my friends and family members die because of that, whether it's through addictions, whether it's through suicide. I heard it when I was at that meeting, that one day at the chiefs assembly. I heard the survivors talk about it and share their stories. I think to be able to acknowledge those, to be able to fund those is part of the reconciliation that we need to work toward.

A few weeks before this state of emergency was declared, the Legislature's Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs was up north listening to presentations about the budget. I know that everyone who came to speak truly wanted to be heard and to have their suggestions included in the budget.

Among many issues discussed, we heard about the need for harm reduction, overdose prevention and supervised consumption sites. In the north and northwestern Ontario, where is the funding for operating grants for supervised consumption sites?

Where is the long-term-care budget for Sioux Lookout?

When we talk about reconciliation, the town of Red Lake has been advocating for funding for a new arena and event centre for years.

When we talk about safety, I know that the government announced sums of resources, money, to law enforcement—\$46 million for the purchase of four police helicopters in the greater Toronto area. What about the safety and security of the people living in First Nation communities and reserves?

Just last week over here, we met with the leadership of Chiefs of Ontario. They told us about some of the criminal behaviour that's happening on-reserve, and it has gotten worse. What the government has been doing is Ontario has been delaying the changes needed to enforce laws on reserve. Under the long-delayed Community Safety and Policing Act that will come into force April 1, First Nation laws are exempt from being enforced.

Chief Laurie Carr from Hiawatha First Nation told the Toronto Star, "It's unthinkable that Ontario doesn't see enforcing our laws and bylaws, which we use to keep drugs and criminals out, as part of adequate and effective policing."

Speaker, the budget announced millions of dollars for critical minerals infrastructure funding and re-announced thousands to mining companies, but at the same time, the budget is missing funding for consultation—proper consultation: free, prior, informed consent.

In conclusion, we would like to take the necessary measures to make sure that housing affordability, health care and mental health are addressed in northern Ontario and the communities of Kiiwetinoong.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): We have time for questions.

Mr. David Smith: Few things are more important to people than the safety of their neighbourhood, their family and their fellow Ontarians. Our government is investing \$4 million to \$6 million over three years to fight crime, support patrol and improve response time to major incidents and serious crimes, demonstrating that we understand Ontario's concern, and it demonstrates that we are a government that does not shy away from fighting these types of crimes and situations.

Through you, Madam Speaker, I ask the member whether they, too, will demonstrate a commitment to protect the safety of Ontarians in their community and vote for our government's plan to keep streets safe, protect families and stop gangs.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch to the member for the question.

1400

I spoke about the crime, how gangs are coming into the neighbouring towns, cities, coming onto reserves. We are not able to enforce laws or bylaws to make sure that—the safety and the security of the people that live in those First Nations and the surrounding communities are not addressed. We need to be able to do that. Sure, you want to buy helicopters to protect the vehicles that are being stolen, but it's important to address the crisis, to make sure that people are safe in our communities.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: To the member from Kiiwetinoong: You noted that there was no funding for consultation with all the communities affected by the Ring of Fire. I wonder if you could talk a little about how many times members from northern First Nations communities have come to Queen's Park and not received meetings, not had meetings with the Premier.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I can say I was here in May 2019, and I remember some of the First Nations from the riding of Kiiwetinoong—and not only that, the Ring of Fire—I remember sitting and listening to the Premier: “We will not move forward without your consent.” But he later understood that “free, prior and informed consent” is a term that addresses the issues, how we're going to move forward.

I think the approach where they continue to—this government actually ripped up the regional framework agreement, where the nine First Nations in the Ring of Fire were working together. Now there are only two. I think with that, again, that will not happen, because you have to work with people. It's a divide-and-conquer approach, and without the proper consultation, I believe the Ring of Fire will not move forward.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Mr. Deepak Anand: First of all, I want to acknowledge the member from Kiiwetinoong. I was listening to you. We actually—Madam Speaker, you won't believe it—share a resident, who used to be his resident and lives in Malton now. And my OLIP intern is with him, so we have too many things in common, as well—and we were together at SCOFEA.

A few quick things: I was looking at what is in the budget for the northern communities and Indigenous communities. The government is investing \$94 million over three years for health and well-being, \$60 million to maintain mental health and addictions services, and \$15 million over three years to support the ongoing delivery of Indigenous public health programs. So these are some of the investments we're making.

But one investment that's stuck to my heart, that I always talk about, is the Skills Development Fund. The government is investing another \$100 million for the Skills Development Fund. So I just want to ask the member: Have you heard anything about the Skills Development Fund in your riding or in northern communities, or anything we can do to increase or improve that service—

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Back to the member from Kiiwetinoong for response.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: You speak about the \$94 million over three years. I did a lot of health advocacy and health policy work before I became an MPP, and I know there's some work that needs to be done when we need to do health transformation with these First Nations. Once you start bringing back the power and the authority to the communities using the provincial and the federal resources, they can have the best health care system in the rest of Ontario, but I think \$94 million is not enough. I

know, working in that system—that time I remember when they declared a public health emergency back in 2016, it was \$222 million that was invested just to address the crisis. That \$94 million is minimal, and I think the government can do more. The government can do better.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Ms. Bhutika Karpoche: I'd like to thank the member from Kiiwetinoong for his presentation. The analysis and reaction to the budget are coming through. One of the stakeholders, Children's Mental Health Ontario, has said that the budget is not meeting the need for urgent and sustained funding in mental health care and they also noted the long wait times for services in the community for children and youth in mental health care.

The member talked about the suicide crisis in his community. Can you please share with members of the House, particularly the government side, what should have been in the budget, what action does the government need to take in order to address the growing mental health care and addiction crisis we're seeing among children and youth?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch for the question. Thank you. It's important.

I talked about some of the impacts of intergenerational trauma, some of the issues that we faced a long time ago, the long-term impacts. But I think one of the things, when we talk about programming, like healing programs, healing centres—that would go a long way to start the process of healing for people. People are going through that on a daily basis and they need to be able to find a way to come to terms with whatever that they are dealing with, whether it's a suicide attempt, whether it's intergenerational trauma. Because it's not the kids that suffer, it's the families that we need to deal with—we need to be able to have that holistic healing approach.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Questions?

Mr. Deepak Anand: Ontario's workers are central to Ontario's plan to build. They are our greatest asset and the reason I believe that people want to invest in Ontario. We are investing in our workers to help them get the skills they need. Since our government launched the Skills Development Fund, in 2021, we have trained over 500,000 workers. Through this budget, we are making an additional \$100-million investment.

When I was in northern communities I heard loud and clear that there is a need for skilled development in the northern communities. To the member, again, I would ask you a question: What can we do to support the northern Indigenous communities through the Skills Development Fund in creating those skills in local communities so that they can work, become financially better and give back to the communities?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: If the government is offering help to the First Nations, I think the First Nations should run away as far as they can.

I think it's important to be able to address the issues that are in the north. The issues are very deep-rooted, and incremental funding, incremental change makes it look as if you're doing something without really doing anything.

What incremental change, what incremental funding does it perpetuate the crisis in our communities. I think we need to have significant resources to be able to go there. We need to be able to provide that healing, housing, the high schools. We need proper runways and there is the cost of living as well.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further debate?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I'm pleased to rise today to speak to motion 22, the budget motion, especially since my remarks on budget day to the media following the Minister of Finance's statement in the government press room are not available.

There has been a lot written about this in the media over the last few days. Apparently this government spent \$310,000 of taxpayer money on this media press room. And so because either the media room isn't working or because the government is withholding the video—I have asked but I haven't had a response yet—I don't have that video.

That aside, I also only have 14 minutes to speak to this motion. Let me say that if the House leader is listening, he might say I should be grateful to the government for being given this time as an independent member. Speaker, I disagree, because his premise is absolutely wrong. I'm only considered an independent member because it was this government that chose to change the rules of the game and therefore made Liberal members independent.

There are only two possible explanations that I can think of: They don't believe they should be held accountable to the residents of our ridings, or they're afraid to hear what we have to say. Either way, the outcome is the same. They are suppressing opposition voices.

1410

Speaker, 14 minutes really is not enough time to highlight one by one all of the issues in this budget, all the people and organizations it lets down, specifically those who struggle to afford a home, those who struggle to put food on the table because the government cancelled the Liberal government's planned increases to minimum wage. Because they constrained wages for workers with Bill 124, there are kids going to school hungry.

I need to say that I respect the Minister of Finance, and I like him too. He's a person who I believe wants to do the right thing for the people in Ontario. He had a career in finance, so he probably knows that this budget is a disaster in waiting for this province. I expect that he may have even tried to tell this to his Premier. He likely knows that this \$9.8-billion deficit and forecasts for deficits for three more years before maybe having a balanced budget is actually at risk.

One reason for this, of course, is that this government has a terrible track record for their forecasts. The deficit projections in nearly every budget tabled by this government have been off by billions. The second reason is the government's misguided decision to implement Bill 124 and restrain wage increases for nurses and education workers, mostly women, to 1%. The government has already had to pay catch-up payments of \$6 billion and

will likely have to pay another \$7 billion more. By the way, Speaker, this government's budget is so lacking in transparency that I don't even see the \$7 billion planned for in this budget, even though they know these payments are coming. It might be hidden in the contingency fund, but, of course, we don't know because they only show the contingency fund amount for the coming year.

Another reason this outlook is at risk, of course, is because, contrary to their rosy ads declaring how rosy things are in Ontario, which cost \$8 million dollars during Super Bowl, things are not okay in Ontario. By the time they plan for a surplus, did you know that if the minister's forecast for growth is off by even 30 basis points, 0.3%, we would have a \$7.5-billion deficit instead of a modest surplus of half a billion? The agencies who rate our province's economic health will now be in the throes of evaluating this huge deficit budget and the huge amount of debt the government is adding to our books. If these agencies lower our ratings based on this poorer economic performance, that will mean higher interest costs for the government's \$160 billion in debt they will have added to our books.

Earlier this week, the minister took us on a proverbial drive across the province while delivering his budget remarks. Well, Speaker, I want to take you on a stroll through the green meadows of the greenbelt, the very one owned by their insider friends, the very one that this government is now under an \$8.3-billion investigation for. It's also the greenbelt that they want to pave over to build their \$20-billion Highway 413, which will also make a few of their rich developer friends, some of the same ones who would benefit under the greenbelt giveaway, even richer.

The Conservatives believe that less government is better for the people, and so they like to say that if you believe in less government, then less money will be spent on government, and therefore, that they are fiscally responsible with taxpayer money. We have a Premier that says the worst place you can give your money is to the government. I think what he meant to say is the worst place to give your money is to his government. This budget puts the fallacy of fiscal conservatism to bed. In this budget, we see a government that is spending \$214 billion of taxpayer money to run this province, and we see they're running it into the ground.

They brag about saving people a few hundred dollars a year on things like licence fees, but they're actually costing us thousands of dollars a year because they're paying their friends and supporters. For example, I would estimate that about half a billion dollars of taxpayer money is being paid out in profits from the public purse to private nursing agencies, like those owned by their insider friends, including those who sit here in this House. And to make it worse, they're financing this with debt. They're paying another half billion dollars to build a parking lot for a foreign-owned spa and financing that with debt.

So what do we have to show for this record level of debt and \$10-billion deficit? We have record high rents; we have record ER closures; we have record numbers of people without a family doctor; we have record numbers

of people lined up at food banks; and we have record numbers of problems in classrooms.

Speaker, can I just take a moment here to mention the TDSB? They're looking at how to balance their budget given the underfunding by this government. One of the things they're looking at to do that is cancelling seniors' learning programs because it isn't core programming for kids K to 12. Many of my Don Valley West constituents have written to me about this. The government needs to step up and pay the few million dollars for this program to the TDSB so that seniors get the programs that they need, but it's not at the expense of our kids' education.

This budget and this government have failed those people. This budget takes taxpayers' hard-earned money—more money than they've taken ever before—and gives little in return. That's just the day-to-day running of the government. Let's talk about the rest of the taxpayer money they're spending.

They've added \$93 billion in debt since they came into office. They're on track to add \$60 billion more according to this budget. Interest payments are ballooning under this government, meaning every tax dollar goes more and more to servicing debt than supporting the people of Ontario. We're over-leveraged on inefficient projects and bad policies: half a billion dollars for the foreign-owned spa at Ontario Place; \$375 million in federal funding that they're leaving on the table because they just don't believe in affordable housing. How else could we explain this? Do you know why? Because their rich developer friends won't get richer.

They've created conditions where hospitals are spending \$1 billion on agency nurses instead of retaining public staff. They're subsidizing private long-term-care facilities that are failing to address the needs of their residents, simply because they're owned by friends of Ford. Billions and billions of taxpayer dollars are going out the door to private companies and the Premier's friends. That means people who trust us with that money are losing while the Premier's friends win.

These are just a few of the big mistakes they've made. We can't forget the pointless and broken change of the Ontario licence plates that can't be seen in the dark, nor the \$1 billion in penalties this government failed to collect from the operators of the 407. They spent \$230 million breaking renewable energy contracts during a climate crisis, then spent millions of dollars taking nurses to court. They sole-source projects rather than finding the best deal for the people of Ontario. All of these examples show how they're taking money from taxpayers in this year's budget and beyond, borrowing money from taxpayers to pay out to the companies of their rich friends. This is fiscal conservatism.

We're over 200% net debt-to-revenue—that means we owe \$2 of debt for every \$1 we collect—the debt-to-GDP ratio is creeping higher; growth is low and slowing; that's what the Minister of Finance told us this week; unemployment is rising—all the things that credit agencies look at to determine our borrowing interest rates.

We can't grow our way out of this problem. Under this government's failed leadership, GDP growth has only

been 1.5% on average for the last six years, and it's not projected to improve. By the way, it averaged 2.6% under Kathleen Wynne.

I'm not surprised they're failing to handle the taxpayers' money well because they don't take their own promises seriously. They promised buck-a-beer; we don't see that. More importantly, they promised a middle income tax cut—haven't seen that yet either in the six years they've been in office. That tax cut would have saved people hundreds of dollars a year, according to the Conservatives's own claims. They promised to not touch the greenbelt. Well, we know how that one went. It's probably not what the voters expected.

Let me bring it back to where I started. Why are Conservatives considered to be good fiscal managers? How could they possibly be considered on the taxpayer's side? They can't; they are not. They're wasting billions of taxpayer dollars and giving little in return.

These failures make life harder for the people of Ontario. They have real consequences for the people of Ontario. Their failure to respect and manage the public's tax dollars means that people have less support.

I don't believe this is simply a mistake or incompetency. I believe the government is deliberately stifling funding for public institutions like health care so they can justify the expansion of private services that enrich their friends. I believe we're seeing that with the expansion of nurse practitioner-led clinics. They're charging fees because there's a market need. The market need has been created by this government underfunding family doctors. For everyday people, that will mean fewer resources and higher costs. That might just be the theme for this government: fewer resources, higher costs. Never has a government spent so much to deliver so little.

1420

Speaker, there are things that are very unsettling in this budget. I feel very unsettled, but there are things that could be done to help people and build prosperity in Ontario:

- investments in the economy;
- spend that \$40 million to continue the Digital Main Street program instead of cancelling it effective March 31;
- implement an “IP box” tax credit to help keep innovative ideas here in Ontario;
- provide incentives to small businesses to adopt new technologies to save time and improve productivity; and
- prioritize the use of the already allocated \$3-billion infrastructure fund in the Ontario Infrastructure Bank away from programs that already have capital and use it to incentivize new high-growth communities in Ontario.

Let's build healthy communities by prioritizing capital funding to the highest-growth, most beneficial projects, like building health care and making sure they're staffed; building affordable housing; repairing the schools where workers of tomorrow are learning; funding our universities and colleges so that those kids have a bright future in whatever trade or field they choose; prioritizing the support of the public services Ontarians need rather than subsidizing private services that provide fewer services at greater cost; and immediately helping those community service organizations that need 5% to survive.

We need to address the affordability crisis. We could do things like giving \$28 million to the Ontario Student Nutrition Program, which will serve over 761,000 meals to students in the province each day.

Stop playing the blame game and blaming everything on the federal government or the Bank of Canada and take action now by providing immediate financial relief for Ontario families by returning the provincial portion of HST related to home heating. Allow fourplexes province-wide to help improve gentle density and increase housing supply.

This government's bad decisions and fiscal mistakes spell trouble. I know it's not popular to cast gloom on our future prospects, and I don't really want to, but I feel compelled to speak out against the position this government has put us in. There's a fundamental issue at the heart of our provincial finances that's leading to a fundamental breakdown of our public services and the quality of life in our province.

The Conservatives may claim to be prudent fiscal managers; they're not. They're populists, plain and simple—populists making short-term decisions in order to stay afloat for just one more term so they can extract as much money as they can from the public coffers before Ontarians realize what they're doing and throw them out of office in 2026.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Questions?

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Thank you to the member opposite. I think this budget, budget 2024, is a budget that's focused on building Ontario, that's building infrastructure, hospitals, education facilities, transit infrastructure and subways. It's also focused on affordability for Ontario residents.

When our government took office in 2018, we did inherit the largest sub-sovereign debt in the entire world. Since then, both Standard and Poor's and Moody's have upgraded Ontario to positive outlook. They have upgraded the financial standing of Ontario, and this government has had six clean financial audits from the Auditor General, unlike the previous Liberal government. So, how do you account for that, to the member opposite?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Well, a positive outlook is good, but it's at risk. Credit agencies will be looking at this. As I said, they'll be looking at it right now and the positive outlook is at risk.

We're still only ranked, I think, fifth of the provinces in terms of our overall debt rating. I think that the member opposite has forgotten that it was this government that balanced the budget several times during their term. That government did it once. Now they're forecasting future deficits and almost a \$10-billion deficit when they had forecast a surplus.

The margin of error here is astounding, and that's what I'm talking about when I talk about their ability to forecast and do the right things for the people of this province by spending money on public services instead of making their rich friends richer.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Ms. Catherine Fife: I serve also with this member on the finance committee, and I need more than a minute and a hot second to talk about their financial record, but I'm going to focus on what we heard at committee.

Region of Peel Chair Nando Iannicca said the dissolution of Peel would have delayed housing in Peel by three, five, seven years. What would it take to make Peel whole? Some \$1.5 billion. Since the revoking of the Hazel McCallion Act, Peel has been sent into a spiral, essentially, and that is how this government makes decisions or establishes legislation.

Can the member please talk about why it is so crucial to have strong partnerships with our municipalities and not create chaos, as they did with the Hazel McCallion Act?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Well, thank you to the member from Kitchener-Waterloo. I enjoy serving with her on finance. I enjoy working with her in finance and appreciate her comments.

Yes, you know, it does cause chaos. It's just one more example of this government flip-flopping. They seem to talk about working and collaborating with leaders of all stripes, and yet when our leader, Bonnie Crombie, became the leader, they quickly, immediately announced the reversal of their decision to dissolve Peel. That does create uncertainty.

It also creates a lot of wasted work. The civil servants are sitting there, working on how to make this plan work, how to make things more efficient, how to make planning processes more efficient so we can get housing built, and instead they're thrown into the middle of a political fight.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Questions?

Mr. John Fraser: In this budget—well, let's just say there's no Ontario government that has spent so much, borrowed so much, added to the debt so much and failed to address the issue of the day, the most important issue: affordability.

There are no measures in this budget to protect renters who are facing massive rent increases across this province, in all of our communities. The dream of an affordable home just got dimmer in this budget; there's nothing there to give people hope.

Two million Ontarians don't have a family doctor, and now they're having to use their credit card instead of their OHIP card to get primary care.

So it's evident that the Premier is able to point his finger, but he can't lift a finger to help Ontario families facing an affordability crisis. My question to the member is: Why do you think that is?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: As I said, Conservative governments like to talk about being fiscally responsible. They're actually spending more money than has ever been spent before, and yet we have record crises. But who does benefit? Yes, we might have Ontarians who have family doctors. We know that number is getting worse and worse, the ones who don't.

But we also know that private nursing agencies are making a lot of money. And who owns those private nursing agencies? Friends of this government.

We know that long-term-care homes are getting more money. Who owns those for-profit long-term care homes? Friends of this government.

So, Speaker, I recognize that there are services being delivered, but we also know that there is a priority around making their rich friends richer. Whether it's the greenbelt, the 413, the Therme spa, there's a record here and the record speaks for itself.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Mr. Rick Byers: I thank the member for her comments and certainly respect the member's commercial background that she brings to this House. She has been an accountant and she has been on the board of the Bank of Canada, so good commercial experience.

I was also very interested in her comments about the size of the deficit. The implication is that she would like to see the deficit lower, and yet, also in her remarks, she was talking about increasing spending, whether it's the TDSB or tax credits or health care. I don't know. I started life as an accountant too, and those statements don't quite add up together.

So I guess my question to the member would be: I'm encouraged by your comments on the deficit and wanting to get it down. To get that deficit lower, would you increase taxes to Ontarians, cut spending in health care or education, or what would be your formula of cuts and tax increases to get the deficit down?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Actually, I didn't say anything about making deficits lower. What I said was that this is a very large deficit for a government that likes to brag about being fiscally responsible.

Speaker, when you're spending money and you're giving a profit to for-profit businesses with taxpayer money, that's the problem I have with this deficit. At least half a billion dollars of the deficit is going to private agency nursing homes. We don't know how much of the deficit is going to profit long-term-care homes, but I know it's significant. We now have private clinics operating in this province; they need to make a profit. That profit comes at the expense and out of the pockets of taxpayers. That's the problem I have.

1430

When Liberal governments had deficits, it's because we were spending on things like making sure that students had affordable access to university. We were making sure that there was rent control in place to protect tenants. We were making sure that student nutrition programs were well funded so kids weren't going to school hungry. Those are the kinds of things that it makes sense to have a deficit on because then you're actually helping the people of Ontario and not your rich insider friends.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I thank the member for her presentation. Yesterday, I hosted a health care town hall in my riding, and it's very clear that people in Ontario are opposed to the privatization of health care. Polling on this

issue reflects that as well. Overwhelmingly, Ontarians don't want to see the health care system privatized.

There was also an acknowledgement that, while things have gotten a lot worse under the Ford Conservatives, it didn't start there. The problems in our health care system started long before, and in fact, under the Liberal government, we did see further privatization of our health care services, of home care and of long-term care.

My question to the member is, it sounds like the member and her colleagues have changed their position, and I hope they have. Could she commit that our health care system will remain publicly funded and publicly delivered in its entirety?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I guess the member—I want to thank her for her question. I guess she assumes that we'll be forming government in 2026. I'm not going to make commitments on behalf of a future government, but I would like to say that it was the Conservative government that privatized long-term care, long-term-care beds that saw people die at extremely high rates under COVID, instead of the not-for-profit long-term-care homes.

I will say that the Liberal government also created nurse practitioner-led clinics that could be billed through OHIP, whereas we have this government not advancing that cause and actually allowing the market to fill the need in creating nurse practitioner-led clinics where people pay with their credit card and not their debit card. People, we've been very clear: We're very committed to public care.

The member also needs to remember that family doctors actually run a small business. That is how they run their practice today. If she wants to talk about overhauling the health system, I'm happy to do that in a future debate.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Time for one quick question.

Hon. Stan Cho: In 2018, when the Liberals left government, you had nearly a \$13-billion deficit with no plan to balance, no long-term-care homes to show for it—611 net new you built. You came to me asking to build in your own riding because your government back then couldn't do it.

The question back to you—and we have no time for this—is, how could you fail so miserably? Lisa Levin, CEO of AdvantAge not-for profits, has already said that this government has done more than your government had done in 15 years. We've done more in just one—

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I apologize. We did not get time for a response.

Further debate?

Hon. George Pirie: It is my pleasure to rise in this House today to speak to the Building a Better Ontario Act. Like the rest of the world, Ontario continues to face economic uncertainty due to high interest rates and global instability. These challenges are putting pressure on Ontario's families and their finances, as well as the province's finances.

In these challenging times, we must have a sound plan and execute it. That is exactly what the Building a Better

Ontario Act is all about and why our government refuses to slow down our work to rebuild this province. We are stepping up to build a better future for everyone, and we are not doing it by putting additional costs and taxes on families, businesses and municipalities.

The Building a Better Ontario Act, if passed, will support economic growth and build stronger communities for the generations to come. Our plan will continue to support people and businesses in Ontario through targeted investments to build a strong future together.

Thanks to the leadership of this Premier and the Minister of Finance, there's a lot happening in Ontario to be excited about, but we also know that there is more work to be done.

These last years have highlighted the weakness of global supply chains and the overreliance on others for what we have here in abundance. Take natural resources like critical minerals, for example. The world is racing to secure reliable sources of minerals for the electric vehicle revolution and the technologies of tomorrow. However, nations that do not share our world-class human rights, environmental standards and labour practices have a dangerous stranglehold on the minerals we need. We do not want to build EVs with nickel mined from Indonesia that uses energy from burning coal and dumps the mine waste in the ocean, and we don't want cobalt from the Congo for obvious human rights issues.

Speaker, I have said it many times: We have what the world needs right here in northern Ontario. We have the minerals, expertise and talent to become the foundation of the growing supply chain for critical minerals and clean technology in North America and beyond. We have an obligation to produce the fuel of the future here in Ontario, because we have the best miners in the world and we have the best environmental standards. That's why we launched the Critical Minerals Strategy, which includes targeted investments in everything from exploration to innovation.

Our plan also includes cutting red tape that has been holding back our sector for years. It is simply unacceptable that it takes 15 to 17 years to permit a mine. That's why our government passed the Building More Mines Act, and the regulations are set to come into force on April 1. This act ensures that the ministry can operate at the pace of business, because we know that governments do not build mines; companies do. The act improves our system without sacrificing our world-class environmental protections or how we consult with Indigenous communities. I'm very proud of that fact, Speaker. This is just one more thing our government is doing to ensure that we are prepared to capitalize on the critical minerals opportunity we have in northern Ontario.

Our government's Critical Minerals Strategy is building an integrated supply chain for clean technologies by connecting mineral producers in northern Ontario with the manufacturing might of the south. But the made-in-Ontario supply chain starts with mining, and mining starts with exploration. That's why we are investing \$35 million in the Ontario Junior Exploration Program to help junior companies find the mines of the future.

But our investments don't stop with exploration. We are investing in the downstream industries like processing, to ensure that we will fill the supply chains. That's why we launched the Critical Minerals Innovation Fund: to help solve modern mining and supply chain challenges and leverage Ontario's highly educated and experienced workforce.

Through the Building a Better Ontario Act, we are investing an additional \$15 million over three years to fund the support, research, development and commercialization of technologies, processes and solutions for critical minerals. This fund is open to companies and open to partnerships between companies and Indigenous communities, academics or non-profit organizations.

This program is the direct result of conversations we have had with industry leaders and will support the rest of our government's infrastructure initiatives. Just listen to what Trevor Walker of Frontier Lithium had to say about our \$15 million investment: "This investment underscores the importance of research, development and technology commercialization and reinforces the collaborative efforts between government, industry and academia and building and maintaining a strong critical minerals sector in Ontario."

When we invest in mining, we are investing in an industry that is leading the charge towards a cleaner, brighter and more sustainable future. We have seen fantastic examples of companies leveraging these investments to change what we think is possible, like Carbonix, an Indigenous-owned company, partnering with Trent University, who are turning mining waste into crucially in-demand graphite components of EV batteries. The president and CEO of Carbonix, Paul Pede, said that thanks to our government's increased support, "Carbonix is now partnering with SGS Lakefield to develop a critical minerals processing demonstration plant at their facility in Lakefield, Ontario." He said, "Carbonix will use this facility to process high-sulphur petroleum coke, sourced from refineries in Ontario, into battery-grade graphite materials for Ontario battery manufacturers."

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Mark Selby, CEO of Canada Nickel, said, "Ontario's commitment to invest in the Critical Minerals Innovation Fund in budget 2024 is the latest in a series of strategic moves to strengthen the province's economy and its position as the world's leading mining jurisdiction."

He is correct. Our plan and targeted investments are driving up the growth, and we are seeing and building critical links in our supply chain, from mining to manufacturing.

Mr. Selby goes on to say, "The opportunities for growth and innovation in critical minerals are unlimited, and Canada Nickel Co. is proud to be at the forefront of this exciting new chapter for Ontario's economy."

Canada Nickel has already leveraged this program in the past to research and develop groundbreaking zero-carbon-footprint processing techniques that they plan to use in two world-class processing facilities. The facilities are planned to be built in the great riding of Timmins and

will support our EV supply chain and clean steel processing capacity, and create good-paying jobs in the north.

Processing was overlooked and forgotten by previous governments, but it is one of the most crucial links in a stable supply chain. Our government understands this. Processing adds value to the product by refining the ore into the materials needed for manufacturing modern technologies. That's why our investments are ensuring we are building the processing capacity in Ontario while creating jobs, adding value to our exports and building a strong made-in-Ontario supply chain.

Wyloo Metals is leveraging the program to research how to reprocess and store tailings materials underground to backfill mine workings to future reduce potential service impacts on their projects in the Ring of Fire. There are too many other projects to name, but they all highlight not only the collaborative work being done across Ontario but also the innovation and brilliance of our people.

Speaking of the Ring of Fire, we are making historic progress, thanks to our government's investment of \$1 billion in the region and the strong partnerships with Webequie First Nation and Marten Falls First Nation. For the first time ever, three First Nations-led environmental assessments are under way for the roads to the Ring of Fire. But we also know we cannot wait for the EAs to be complete to start thinking about the next steps. We must be prepared and act with urgency. That's why, at PDAC earlier this year, I signed a community development agreement with Marten Falls First Nation and Webequie First Nation. This agreement is the next major step in building the corridor to prosperity, connecting the communities to the highway network and mining opportunities in the Ring of Fire.

The agreement will support shovel-ready infrastructure projects like new training facilities that will create more local jobs and upskill individuals to prepare them for meaningful careers. It supports recreational facilities that will be important community gathering spaces for the increasing number of youths that will be able to stay in their communities. Most importantly, the agreement is designed to improve the well-being and readiness of First Nations partners to participate fully in future economic development, including building roads and mineral development. We have also agreed to work together to make decisions on construction, ownership and governance of the proposed road network so we can improve project timelines.

Speaker, this is one of the most important projects of our lifetime, and the people of Marten Falls First Nation and Webequie First Nation have waited far too long. Under the leadership of this Premier, we have made more progress on the Ring of Fire than any other government ever has, and we will continue to realize this opportunity because we know the benefits it will bring.

I am honoured to be associated with Chief Bruce and Chief Cornelius. They have a strong vision for building stronger communities. That is a vision our government shares.

Our government's commitment to a strong mining sector is evident in the Building a Better Ontario Act. We will continue to seek out ways to sharpen our competitive advantage and bring prosperity to Ontario. Mining is a pillar of our economy and will only grow in importance. I am proud to be a part of a government that not only recognizes that, but puts a priority on it, because the future will be fuelled by mining. It is our obligation to our children and our grandchildren that we realize these opportunities.

When Ontario comes together, the people of this province can accomplish remarkable things. Working together, we can overcome any challenge. Thanks to the leadership of this government, we will continue to build Ontario into the place that we all know it can be. This is a future I know we all want. This budget, if passed, will help us build a better Ontario together.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Questions?

Ms. Bhutika Karpoche: The minister talked about the development of the Ring of Fire. I have a very simple question: Did he receive the consent of Neskantaga First Nation, as he is required to?

Hon. George Pirie: Speaker, we believe fully in and have exercised the duty to consult on these projects—fully. The Building More Mines Act was endorsed with royal assent in May of last year. We have finished the regulations, and they will be enacted on April 1. We're fully committed to the duty to consult, and we've filled every obligation that's required of us. Our relationships with the First Nations people are superb. Mining has done a great job.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I'd like to ask the minister: We had 15 years of a previous government that ignored northern Ontario; referred to it as a "no man's land"; did not respect, I think, the opportunities that were available to all Ontarians by working with northern Ontario to really develop opportunities and grow our economy.

You've talked a lot about the mining sector today and how we can do that. I'd like you to elaborate on that: on how the investments of this government and what this government is doing in the budget are really going to assist northern Ontario and drive mining forward, and how they're going to help integrate the northern economy into success for all Ontarians.

Hon. George Pirie: Thank you very much for that question. Speaker, it's well established that it can take 15 to 17 years to permit a mine. I'll reference Côté Lake. That was a mine that took 17 years to get permitted. What are they doing now? They're spending \$3 billion investing in a gold mine that will have a critical mass of 20 million ounces. They have full employment with the First Nations communities, Mattagami First Nation and Flying Post. And they are investing in an autonomous fleet of haul trucks.

What else are they doing with that \$3 billion and with the technology? They're so concerned about the environmental impact that they won't even discharge water. That's what miners do. All across Ontario where we

mine, the discharge water is cleaner than the intake water. That's why we support the mining sector in Ontario. That's why we're committed to—

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Minister of Mines, I was listening to your presentation, listening to your comments. When we talk about free, prior and informed consent, how much resources have you put to Nibinamik First Nation?

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Hon. George Pirie: Speaker, I've said many times, we are open for consultation. We have an open-door policy. Actually, all of the members in the mining community have the same philosophy. We passed that new Mining Act without changing a word in Ontario's world-class environmental standards or the duty to consult. We believe in it, and we carry it out.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Mr. Ric Bresee: Madam Speaker, to the member from Timmins: I know that he is an expert in mining, and he has a long history in that industry. But I also know that he is a former mayor of Timmins.

My question to the minister: We know how important infrastructure is in the municipalities and making sure that we have the ability to continue to grow our municipalities. So this government has not made the "out of sight, out of mind" mistake that the previous Liberal government did. So, through you Speaker, I ask the minister to please explain why our government has decided to invest more to build the infrastructure needed to construct new homes in all municipalities across the province.

Hon. George Pirie: You hit the nail on the head. Timmins is a mining community, supported by forestry and agriculture. We have camps in Detour Lake that have 3,000 people in them. Kamiskotia Lake has 1,600 people in them. That's why it's important that this government understands how critical it is to invest in the infrastructure to build the houses in the places like Timmins—absolutely essential. But not just Timmins; Kirkland Lake, Red Lake, Dryden—we're committed to that. We want our people to work and to live where they work. It's important for the towns. It's important for the recreational facilities. It's important for the health of the towns.

Speaker, in the last 15 or 20 years, the population in northern Ontario was declining. Why is it declining? Because they didn't have any focus on mining. One of the last Premiers said, in fact, that the economy of Ontario will not be defined by people digging holes in the ground. But let me tell you, we dig world-class holes in the ground that produce critical minerals, and we have to get the infrastructure into the towns to make sure that people that live in those communities—I'm one of them who lives in that community.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Patrice Barnes): Question?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch, Madam Speaker. Listening to the mining minister on the approach to the Ring of Fire—you know that your current approach will not work. What are you going to do when the project becomes dead, the Ring of Fire becomes dead? What will you do then? Because your approaches will not work.

Hon. George Pirie: The Ring of Fire is a generational opportunity, and everybody knows that it's a generational opportunity. And the progressive leaders of the First Nations communities know it's a generational opportunity. In fact, they are leading the consultation. They are leading the consultation with their neighbouring communities. And privately, those communities, of course, know that development is absolutely essential. But it is the leaderships of Webequie and Marten Falls that are leading these consultations, and I believe in them.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Patrice Barnes): Quick question, quick response.

Hon. Charmaine A. Williams: When I had the chance to go up north to be with the Minister of Mines and got to experience the mining community and how much pride it brought to so many miners, but especially the women working in the mines, and I had the opportunity to meet some women underground who are—their lives have completely changed, because the opportunities that having a job, working in the mining field, has awarded to them.

Can you speak to the further impacts and how generationally it's going to change the lives when we see more women working in the mining industry and contributing to Ontario's economy?

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Patrice Barnes): I recognize the Minister of Mines.

Hon. George Pirie: Thank you very much for that question under this minister who leads in the recognition of the opportunity that women in mining hold.

Forty per cent of the workforce, of course, is women. There's only 14% of women that are employed in the mining sector. When you talk, as we have, with the young women that are employed in that sector and they find how rewarding the communities are, it's truly uplifting. It's an incredible experience.

Not that long ago, we were in northern Ontario but on that particular trip we were also in Sudbury, and I told you about the young woman who was from Moosonee, who got her education and was working at 9,600 feet at the Creighton Mine. What did she want to do? She wanted to be a mining engineer. What was she working on? Electric vehicles at 9,600 feet at the Creighton Mine and absolutely loving it—from Moosonee.

That's the opportunity that exists for women in mining, and ensuring that we maximize the opportunity and exposure of women working in mining.

Report continues in volume B.

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Triantafilopoulos, Effie J. (PC)	Oakville North—Burlington / Oakville-Nord—Burlington	
Vanthof, John (NDP)	Timiskaming—Cochrane	Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire de l'opposition officielle

Member and Party / Député(e) et parti	Constituency / Circonscription	Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités
Vaugois, Lise (NDP)	Thunder Bay—Superior North / Thunder Bay—Supérieur-Nord	
Wai, Daisy (PC)	Richmond Hill	
West, Jamie (NDP)	Sudbury	
Williams, Hon. / L'hon. Charmaine A. (PC)	Brampton Centre / Brampton-Centre	Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity / Ministre associée des Perspectives sociales et économiques pour les femmes
Wong-Tam, Kristyn (NDP)	Toronto Centre / Toronto-Centre	
Yakabuski, John (PC)	Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke	
Vacant	Lambton—Kent—Middlesex	
Vacant	Milton	